

THE BEAST™

R. L. STONE

ALADDIN

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

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About R.L. Stine

To Joe, who seldom gets off the track



I shut my eyes as a shrill scream escaped my throat.

Bouncing hard, I opened them in time to see the trees fly by in a jarring blur. “Whoa!” I was tossed forward as I roared straight down into darkness.

A sudden spin made me cry out again. The car tilted hard to the left and I slammed into my cousin, Ashley Franks. She was screaming, too. Her blond hair flew out wildly behind her head.

We swooped down once more, a sharp dip. I yelped in surprise as I felt myself fly up from the seat. The trees whirred by, shadowy in the dark night light. The car clattered noisily as it began to climb again.

“This is *great!*” I screamed to Ashley.

Her face was bright red. Her blue eyes were wide, staring up to the top of the track. She grinned at me and started to reply. But instead, she let out a startled *whoop* as our car plunged down.

Down, down with a deafening roar.

The wind battered my face. I gripped the bar tightly with both hands. Down, down—and into total darkness.

“Huh?”

A tunnel. We whirred through the tunnel, then back out into the dim light filtering through the dark, leafy trees. Then a jolting turn pushed me into Ashley again. My cousin was screaming too hard to notice.

Another tunnel. Another climb. Another swooping, roaring spin that made the car squeal.

And then we slowed to a stop.

Over my thudding heartbeat I could hear screams and laughter behind us. Ashley and I had been riding in the front car.

I turned to her. She was still breathing hard. Her hair was wild, standing almost straight up. She was trying to brush it down with both hands.

“You were right, James!” she exclaimed. “The Beast® is *awesome!*”

“It’s the best! I told you!” I cried breathlessly. I climbed out of the roller coaster car onto the platform. “Hey—I’m dizzy!”

“You’re always dizzy,” Ashley teased, following me out. She staggered for a few steps, then grabbed my shoulder. She laughed. “Whoa! I’m a little dizzy, too, I guess.”

We staggered off the platform and followed the exit path. I turned back to stare at the enormous roller coaster, the wooden tracks rising up darker even than the night sky.

My heart was still racing. As Ashley and I walked, we were surrounded by laughing, shouting voices. “I—I thought the ride was over,” Ashley said, still trying to untangle her hair. “But then we started to climb again.”

“That has to be the longest roller coaster ride anywhere!” I exclaimed. “Other roller coasters last only a minute or two. But this one takes over four minutes!”

I’m an expert on roller coasters. I ride them whenever I can. And I never ride just once. I always go back and ride again and again.

The third time is usually the best. By that time, your screaming muscles are limbered up and you can howl like a pro all the way.

I'd been to Paramount's Kings Island twice before. And I had ridden The Beast at least half a dozen times. But this was Ashley's first time.

She's twelve and I'm twelve, but I think I look older. She's about four inches shorter than me, even with all that wild blond hair. She's skinny, too. I guess she's kind of pretty. She has great blue eyes and a nice smile.

People always tease me because I don't smile much. I've got dark brown hair and dark eyes, and I just look serious, that's all.

Ashley and I don't get to see each other very often. Our families live about three hundred miles apart. But when we do, we get along pretty well.

We like to tease each other and get on each other's case. Sometimes we play pretty mean tricks on each other. But I guess that's normal.

We stopped at a food stand and bought sodas. All that screaming can make you thirsty.

After gulping down half her cup of soda, Ashley glanced up at the dark sky. A pale half-moon had risen above the trees. "It's getting pretty late," she said. "Past your bedtime, James."

"Ha-ha," I replied, rolling my eyes.

She took another long gulp from her cup. Some of it trickled onto the front of her sleeveless blue T-shirt, but she didn't notice. She pushed her hair off her forehead with her free hand.

"What do you want to do now?" I asked. We had been at the park since early afternoon. We had already been on most of the other roller coasters.

"Let's ride The Beast again!" Ashley cried. Her eyes lit up as an excited grin crossed her face. "Come on!"

"The line is pretty long," I told her, motioning to it. I glanced at my watch. "And the park is going to close soon."

"Come on!" she cried, not listening to me. She tugged at the sleeve of my T-shirt. "Hurry!"

I pulled back. "No. Really. There isn't time, Ashley," I insisted.

"Please! Let's just try—okay?" she begged, tugging at me again. "Let's get in line again. Please?"

"Well . . . okay," I agreed.

And that was when all the trouble began.



Ashley and I jogged side by side to the end of the line. It stretched along a low wall in front of a line of trees. We were breathing hard by the time we got there.

Up ahead, we could hear the clatter of roller coaster cars and we could hear kids screaming their heads off. But we couldn't see them. The Beast stretches off into the woods. It's almost entirely hidden from view.

We stepped up behind two teenage boys. They both had long black hair. One of them wore a Cincinnati Reds cap. The one with the cap shoved the other one playfully against the wall. Then they both laughed.

A blue-uniformed guard stepped up suddenly behind Ashley and me. She set down a sign that said LINE CLOSED.

"We just made it!" Ashley cried happily. "We're the last ones!"

I glanced at my watch. I was a little worried about the time. I was supposed to call my mom when we were ready to be picked up.

But we were so busy riding all the roller coasters, I'd completely forgotten about calling. We'll have to phone her as soon as the ride is over, I told myself.

A cool breeze blew over us. I could hear high-pitched screams coming from the roller coaster up ahead.

"This is great!" Ashley cried. "I can't believe we're the very last ones in line!"

"Yeah. We just made it," I said.

The two guys ahead of us were goofing around. "Hey, Gary, give me my hat!"

"Who's going to make me?"

They started wrestling for the hat, laughing and shoving each other. The one named Gary bumped Ashley hard.

"Hey—" she cried out angrily.

"Sorry," he said, grinning at her. He pointed to his friend. "Ernie pushed me."

Ernie grabbed the Reds cap from Gary and pulled it over his dark hair. "You ever ride The Beast before?" he asked Ashley.

"Sure. About a hundred times," Ashley lied.

"You ever sit in the front seat?" Gary asked.

"Lots of times," Ashley told him.

"Were you scared?" Gary asked, grinning at me.

"No way!" I told him.

"You know, The Beast is haunted," Ernie said, adjusting his cap. His grin faded.

"Huh?" I stared back at him, trying to get the joke.

"Really," he insisted. "It's haunted."

"Everyone knows that," his friend chimed in.

"Give us a break," Ashley said, rolling her eyes.

"It was on the news," Gary told her. "On TV. I saw it."

"There's a ghost," Ernie said. "Late at night after the park is closed, he rides The Beast. Again and again."

"Oh, sure," I replied sarcastically. "Hey, we're not little kids, you know!"

“I’m not joking,” Ernie said, his expression serious.

“It was on the news. Really,” Gary added. “The ghost rides late at night. The security guards—they hear the clatter of the wheels. But when they run to check it out, none of the cars has moved.”

“It’s a total mystery,” Ernie said, adjusting his cap again.

“No way!” I cried. “There’s no ghost—”

But at that moment I felt icy fingers close around the back of my neck.



I let out a frightened yelp before I realized that Ashley had grabbed the back of my neck.

Everyone laughed.

Ashley laughed hardest of all. She thought it was a real riot.

“How’d you get such cold hands?” I demanded angrily.

She held up her cold cup of soda. “Gotcha!” she cried.

She could be a real pain sometimes. I could feel myself blushing. Luckily, the line had started to move, and the two teenage guys turned away.

“Do you think there’s really a ghost that rides The Beast?” Ashley whispered as we followed the line forward.

“Of course not,” I replied angrily. “Do you think there’s really a tooth fairy?”

“You mean there *isn’t*?” she cried, acting startled. “Then how do those quarters get under my pillow when I lose a tooth?”

She laughed, but her expression quickly became serious. “Those two boys believe in the ghost,” she whispered. “They weren’t kidding.”

“There’s no ghost,” I insisted.

“But they saw it on the news,” she replied.

We stepped onto the platform. The breeze felt cool and damp. I could still feel Ashley’s cold fingers on the back of my neck. I shivered.

I glanced at my watch again. Nearly eleven o’clock. I had promised my mom I would call before ten. How could I have forgotten?

“We didn’t call. Everyone will be furious,” I muttered.

“Don’t be such a nervous nut,” Ashley replied.

“I’m not a nervous nut,” I insisted. “Don’t call me a nervous nut.”

“You’re a nervous nut,” she repeated.

I tugged her blond hair hard.

She punched my shoulder.

I grabbed two of her fingers and stretched them till they cracked.

She punched me harder.

Luckily the line moved forward before we got out of control.

A few minutes later we were eagerly scrambling into a car. We were the last ones on The Beast. This time we were in the middle row of the last car.

When we were all on board, the heavy car began to roll. Up, up the steep track.

I knew what was ahead. I knew what would happen as soon as we reached the top.

And I couldn’t wait.

I took a deep breath and prepared to start screaming.



The ride was even more awesome the second time. We swooped and swirled through the dark trees. The tunnels whirred around us. Then we climbed into the purple sky—and back down into the woods.

I felt as if I were on some kind of spaceship, hurtling into darkest space.

Suddenly I couldn't hear the screams and happy cries of the others. I couldn't see Ashley beside me or the kids in the seat in front of us.

I was in my own world.

A world of whirling shadows. A world of speed and wind.

When the car jolted to a stop, I groaned in disappointment. I didn't want the ride to end. I wanted to keep flying, soaring through the trees, the cold wind rushing against my face.

I just sat there for a long while with my eyes shut.

Even though we had stopped, I could still feel the movement of the car, still feel the jarring turns, the swooping slides, the steep climbs.

I don't know how long I sat there. Probably just a few seconds. Maybe it was close to a minute.

Then I opened my eyes and climbed out. "Wasn't that *excellent*?" I turned to ask Ashley. "Wasn't that the best?"

I gasped when I realized she was *gone*!



“Ashley?”

I gazed up and down the platform.

People were hurrying to the exit, laughing and shouting. I didn't see her anywhere.

“Ashley?”

I turned back to the roller coaster car. Was she still there?

No.

Had she somehow managed to climb out on the other side of the car? No. That was impossible.

So where was she?

“Ashley?” I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted. My voice came out kind of trembly. I was still shaky from the ride.

She must have hurried to the exit, I decided. She would be waiting for me outside the gate.

My heart was still pounding and my knees were a little wobbly as I started jogging down the platform and out of the roller coaster.

My shadow stretched long and dark in front of me as I ran. The overhead lights flickered on and off. A woman's voice suddenly blared out from a nearby loudspeaker. “Paramount's Kings Island is now closed,” she announced. “Please make your way to the front exit.”

The announcement repeated a few times as the overhead lights continued to signal everyone to leave.

“Ashley?” I stopped in front of The Beast's exit, searching the shadows for her.

No sign of her.

I made my way past a T-shirt and souvenir stand, closed now for the night. Several yards up ahead, I saw Gary and Ernie, bumping each other as they made their way toward the front of the park.

I stopped and made a full circle, turning slowly, studying each person I saw, searching for Ashley.

But she had totally disappeared.

“I don't believe this,” I muttered out loud.

How could she do this to me? If this is some kind of joke, I thought, I'll pound her! I really will!

The lights flickered one last time, then remained dimmed. The announcement about the park being closed repeated a few more times.

We've got to get out of here, I told myself.

But where was Ashley? Where?

The ghost got her!

That thought popped into my head.

The ghost that haunts The Beast grabbed her during the ride!

I was so angry at Ashley, I almost wished it were true. But of course, it was a stupid thought.

Without realizing it, I had started to walk toward the front of the park. I found myself in a large group of people who had just come off The Vortex, the roller coaster next to The Beast.

The Vortex was a wild ride. It swirled you upside down about six times. At least, I *think* it

was six times. After a few spins I lost count.

Ashley and I had ridden The Vortex right after dinner. Not exactly the best timing. But our stomachs survived.

Except maybe the ride had scrambled Ashley's brain! I thought angrily. What else could explain her disappearing like this?

I'll wait for her at the front gate, I decided. She's bound to show up there sooner or later.

Sooner, I hoped.

I remembered there was a row of pay phones near the ticket booths. Maybe that was where Ashley had headed. I could call my mom from there.

I made my way down International Street, the broad walkway at the front of the park. The long reflecting pond in the center of the street lay dark and still. The fountains that sent up tall geysers of water during the day had all been turned off.

How could she just disappear? I asked myself. I was growing angrier and angrier.

What is her problem?

It felt strange walking through the dim light, stepping through shifting shadows. The enormous park had been so bright and noisy. Now it was nearly dark and empty.

On the other side of the gate, car headlights rolled past, casting bright spotlights on the hundreds of people heading to their cars.

I jogged to the row of telephones, my heart pounding. My eyes searched the shadows, darting rapidly over the crowd.

No sign of my cousin.

I had a heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach. Like a rock holding me down. I stopped a few yards from the pay phones.

I took a deep breath and held it, waiting for the heavy feeling to fade away.

"Ashley—where are you?" I murmured.

Why wasn't she waiting at the gate for me? Why wasn't she standing by the pay phones?

Taking another deep breath, I watched the last stragglers head out to the parking lot. The park grew even more silent. The loudest sounds were the hum of car engines as they pulled away.

The heavy feeling in my stomach didn't go away. I knew it wouldn't. It was worry. I always got that heavy feeling when I was worried. Really worried.

Something must have happened to Ashley.

Something bad.

She wouldn't just disappear. Even Ashley wouldn't play a dumb joke like that.

A cold shiver ran down my back.

Yes, I decided, trying to force back my panic. Something has happened to Ashley.

But what?



All kinds of crazy thoughts roared into my head. Without realizing it, I started back into the park.

I hurried past the long reflecting pool. A tall replica of the Eiffel Tower stood at the far end, black against the starless purple sky.

The electric lights had all been dimmed. A damp mist had lowered over the park. I felt as if I were moving through a cloud.

It was like a dream. Swirling shadows in the thickening mist. Dim yellow light casting looming, eerie forms.

No one in sight.

The huge park stretched out on all sides of me. Deserted. The stores and restaurants dark and empty.

“Ashley?” Her name escaped from my throat. My voice came out shaky and high.

This *is* a dream, I told myself.

This *has* to be a dream. And I’m going to wake up and find that I haven’t really lost my cousin.

I shook my head hard, trying to shake the nightmare away.

But it wasn’t a dream.

I had run halfway to the tall, dark tower before I stopped.

Why was I doing this? Where did I think I was going?

My heart was thudding in my chest. The heavy rock in my stomach grew even heavier.

I have to get back to the front gate, I told myself. I have to call home. I have to—

“Hey—James!”

I heard the familiar voice. But staring into the heavy mist, I saw no one.

“James!”

I spun around and was surprised to see Ashley come running from the side of a darkened pastry shop. In the pale light through the heavy fog, she looked like a ghost, her bare arms white, her blond hair fanned out behind her.

She stopped a few feet in front of me, breathing hard. “Where *were* you?” she cried breathlessly.

“Huh?” My mouth dropped open.

“Where *were* you?” she repeated angrily.

“Where were *you*?” I cried shrilly. “I got off the roller coaster—and you were gone!”

“No. *You* were gone!” she insisted. She shoved me hard with both hands. “What a jerk!”

“You’re the jerk!” I cried, stumbling backward. I was so angry, I moved forward to shove her back. Then all at once I realized how funny the whole thing was.

“I was searching for you, and you were searching for me!” I exclaimed, laughing.

“It’s not funny!” Ashley cried. “I got off The Beast and started for the exit. I glanced back to make sure you weren’t there. So I thought you’d gotten ahead of me. I started running to catch up to you. But—but . . .” Her voice trailed off. She took a deep breath.

“I wasn’t ahead of you. I was behind you,” I explained.

“I got turned around. I thought I was heading toward the front gate,” Ashley continued.

“But I ended up at The Vortex. By the time I got back in the right direction—”

“Let’s just get out of here!” I cried.

We began running to the main gate, our sneakers thudding on the pavement.

“The park is so *weird* looking!” Ashley cried as we ran.

She was right. The fog had grown even heavier, thicker. The dimmed light from overhead landed at strange angles. It got tangled in the mist, made the ground appear to shimmer and smoke.

“It—it’s really hard to see,” I called to her. I was staring straight ahead but couldn’t see the front gates through the fog. Glancing down, I saw that my shadow had completely disappeared.

We moved quickly, silently, through the fog. Past the dark and still reflecting pool.

We ran faster when the front gates came into view.

The heaviness in my stomach had vanished, replaced by a sharp ache in my side as I ran.

“Finally!” Ashley cried.

She reached the exit first. She gripped the bars of the gate and pulled.

It didn’t budge.

She pulled again. Then she tried pushing.

When she turned back to me, her expression revealed her panic. “James—we’re locked in!” Ashley cried.



The next gate was locked, too. And so was the next.

We ran from gate to gate, trying to find one unlocked. But the entire row of metal exit gates was locked.

The vast parking lot had become empty and dark. Far in the distance I could just see the red taillights of the last cars.

“Hey—let us out!” Ashley cried.

But there was no one to hear her.

The fog closed in on us, swirled around us, blanketed us in darkness. I knew there had to be security guards somewhere nearby. But the fog had become so thick, it was hard to see even a few feet in any direction.

Ashley stepped close beside me. Her hair fell in tangles over her forehead. She rubbed her bare arms, trying to warm them in the wet, cold fog.

“Your mom is going to have a cow!” she cried unhappily.

My mom! Of course!

In all the confusion I had forgotten about calling. The pay phones were right behind us. All we had to do was call my mom and she’d come rescue us.

No problem.

“The phones! Come on!” I cried. I turned and started to make my way through the swirling fog toward the phones. “Have you got a quarter?” I called back to her.

She searched the pockets of her baggy shorts. “Yeah. Here.”

I took the quarter from her and stepped up to the phone booth. I lifted the receiver and started to drop the quarter in the slot.

Suddenly a hand grabbed my wrist.

“Don’t!” Ashley said softly.

I spun around, startled. “What’s your problem?” I demanded.

“Don’t call,” Ashley repeated, her eyes lighting up excitedly. She still hadn’t let go of my wrist.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” I asked shrilly. “You want to get out of here—don’t you?”

She shook her head. A mischievous grin spread over her face. “No,” she whispered.

Then she grabbed the quarter out of my fingers. “No.”

I held out my hand. “Ashley—give me back the quarter. You’re not funny.”

Grinning at me, she backed away. She dropped the coin back into the pocket of her shorts. “Let’s stay, James,” she pleaded. “Let’s stay in the park all night.”

I gaped at her. My mouth dropped open. “Huh? Are you for real?”

“Come on—it’ll be cool!” she exclaimed. She tried to tug me away from the phones. But I pulled out of her grasp.

“We’ll get caught,” I told her. “We’ll get into big trouble.”

“We’ll hide,” she replied. “It’ll be a real adventure.”

“I don’t like adventure,” I confessed. “There are security guards all over this place. We’ll get caught, Ashley. Give me the quarter.”

I reached out for it. But she backed away, shaking her head, flashing me that devilish grin.

What a pain.

“You’re crazy,” I told her.

“You’re no fun,” she replied.

“It’s cold and foggy. It’s creepy here at night,” I said. “What’s the fun part?”

“I want to see the ghost,” she confessed.

So *that* was it!

“Ashley, you didn’t believe that dumb story about some ghost riding The Beast at night.

Those guys were just goofing,” I told her.

“No, they weren’t. They were serious,” she insisted.

“Ashley, there’s no ghost,” I said firmly. “Now, if you won’t give me the quarter, I’ll call home collect.” I started back toward the phones.

“Prove there’s no ghost,” she called after me.

I turned around. “What do you mean—*prove* it?”

“Prove it,” she repeated, tossing her hair back over her shoulders. “Let’s go watch. Let’s see if anything happens.”

“Ashley!” I moaned. “Don’t be a jerk.”

“I’ll bet you ten dollars,” she said.

“Huh?” She caught me off guard. “You’ll bet me ten dollars *what*?”

“That the ghost comes out,” she replied, her eyes wide, challenging me. “If it doesn’t appear, I’ll pay you ten dollars.”

It was a stupid bribe. But Ashley knew that I can never turn down a bet. It’s a real weakness.

I once had to stand on my head and whistle “Oh, Susannah” on the beach in front of a crowd of girls for ten minutes just because I bet my older brother that I could. It was so embarrassing! You’d think I’d learn my lesson.

But I never did.

“Okay, it’s a bet,” I told Ashley. I couldn’t believe I was agreeing. I knew we could get into major trouble if a security guard found us. And what about our parents?

Ashley had that all figured out. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the quarter. “Here. Call your mom and tell her we’re staying at one of your friend’s houses tonight. Tell her we met him here and his parents drove us home,” she said, tossing me the quarter.

I missed, and it hit the ground. I bent down and grabbed it quickly, before it rolled away in the heavy darkness.

“Clever,” I said. “Very clever.”

Why was I going along with this? Just to win ten dollars? I knew it was a horrible idea. I had that heavy feeling in my stomach again.

Why was I going to spend the night in a foggy park, hanging out, hiding, waiting for a ghost to ride The Beast?

Because of a ten-dollar bet?

I guess I was doing it so Ashley wouldn’t call me a jerk again.

I mean, that’s a pretty good reason—*isn’t* it?

I made my call. It seemed to go okay. My mom was annoyed that we didn’t call when we were supposed to, but she was tired and didn’t ask too many questions.

Then, huddling close, we made our way through the dimly lit park toward the woods that hid The Beast.

The fog swirled around us. The soft light got caught up in the fog and barely made it to the ground.

I gazed around at the dark shops and restaurants, the empty game booths, closed and silent. It was all so eerie. And the heavy fog made it even more dreamlike and unreal.

“This is creepy,” I whispered. “Too creepy.”

“It’s exciting,” Ashley corrected me. “It’s the perfect night for a ghost to come out, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Perfect,” I muttered.

I didn’t believe in ghosts. And I didn’t think Ashley did either.

But Ashley believed in adventure. In a big way.

I always thought it was just a stage she was going through. But I guess she hadn’t made it through it yet.

We were passing a frozen lemonade stand, its window closed, when we heard footsteps. Nearby.

“Quick—over here!” Ashley whispered.

She grabbed my arm and pulled me behind a tall shrub beside the lemonade stand.

But she was too late.

A blue-uniformed security guard moved quickly out of the fog. He was in front of us before I could duck behind the shrub.

“Hey—caught you!” he shouted.



With a silent gasp I dropped to my knees behind the shrub. Ashley huddled beside me.

The security guard laughed as he stepped forward.

We're in major trouble now, I thought.

Then I heard another laugh.

"Caught you," the guard repeated.

Peering over the top of the bush, I saw *two* blue-uniformed guards, both tall and powerful looking.

The guard stepped right in front of Ashley and me to greet his friend.

"Just taking a breather," the second guard said. "Some fog, huh?"

"Yeah. My flashlight hardly cuts through it," the first man replied. "Weird."

Behind the pine shrub, Ashley and I grinned at each other. We realized the guard hadn't even seen us. I had been holding my breath the whole time. Now I let it out in a long *whoosh* and started breathing normally again.

"Where are you tonight?" the first guard asked.

"Rivertown," his friend replied. "It'll be a quiet night."

They chatted for a little while longer. I couldn't hear what they were saying.

I practically jumped out of the bush when Ashley tapped my shoulder. I spun around angrily. Why did she have to scare me like that?

"Come on," she whispered. "We'll be late." Late? Late for what?

I shook my head and pointed to the two guards, who were still chatting away.

"They won't see us," Ashley whispered. "It's too foggy and dark." She yanked on my arm so hard, she nearly knocked me over.

"Stop pulling me," I protested in a loud whisper. But I obediently climbed to my feet. Ducking low, I began to follow her.

A row of low bushes and trees followed the path. We stayed behind them as we tiptoed away.

I could still hear the two guards talking, somewhere behind us now.

A sudden gust of wind made the bushes shiver. My heart was pounding in my chest. My legs felt as if they each weighed a thousand pounds.

My sneakers sank into the wet grass. The bushes shook again. The trees began to whisper. Wisps of fog swirled just above our heads.

"Hurry," Ashley urged a few yards ahead of me.

I began to feel a little better, a little more relaxed.

That had been a close call. But we were getting away from the guards.

Then I tripped over something hard—a low metal fence.

I cried out in surprise as I fell out onto the pavement.

The fence clattered loudly beneath me.

I landed hard on my elbows and knees.

"Hey!" Both guards shouted at once.

I frantically tried to scramble to my feet. But this time I knew we really were caught.



I struggled to my feet.

Both knees throbbed with pain as I started to run. Stumbling, staggering forward.

I could hear the startled shouts of the guards close behind me. White beams of light from their flashlights bobbed along the path.

I dived over a clump of tall flowers and started running across the grass. Through the fog I caught glimpses of Ashley up ahead, running, running at full speed, her arms thrashing the air as she moved, almost as if she were swimming through the misty darkness.

“Hey—stop!” The guard’s shout rang out from the path.

The sharp voice cut through me like a saw’s blade. I uttered a frightened gasp. And somehow kept running.

My sneakers squished over the soft ground.

I could hear the two guards close behind, their flashlights darting wildly over the bushes as they ran.

Suddenly I found myself running between tall trees. We were in the woods now. I followed the crunch of Ashley’s sneakers somewhere up ahead.

The fog grew thicker, wetter. Beads of cold water ran down my face.

I was gasping for breath. I tried to ignore the sharp pain in my side. But it had forced me to slow down.

Ashley had stopped. I caught up with her. She had her back against a tree. She was bent forward, hands pressed on her knees, trying to catch her breath.

I stopped in front of her and rubbed my sides, trying to rub the pain away.

“Nice move, ace,” she whispered, making a face at me.

“I couldn’t help it. I tripped,” I whispered back.

We both listened hard.

We couldn’t hear the guards.

Off to the right, I could see two flickering beams of light. The light appeared to be moving in the other direction.

“I—I think we lost them,” I whispered. My throat felt as dry as cotton. I could barely choke out the words.

We stood watching the lights until they disappeared in the darkness. A cold chill ran down my back. My sneakers were soaked. The bottoms of my jeans were wet, too.

“What are we doing here?” I asked Ashley bitterly.

“We have a bet—remember?” she replied.

She stepped away from the tree. “Come on. This is fun.”

“Fun? Fun?” I cried, hurrying to keep up with her as she slipped quickly through the trees. “So far, Ashley, I’m not having fun.”

A few minutes later the trees ended and we found ourselves in a flat clearing. I gazed around, struggling to see through the fog. The sky seemed to grow darker. The only sound was the chirping of crickets in the trees.

“Now we’re really lost,” I grumbled, shoving my hands into my jeans pockets.

“No, we’re not,” Ashley replied quietly.

“Huh? Then, where are we?” I demanded.

“Look,” she said. She pointed straight ahead.

I suddenly realized it wasn't the black sky I'd been staring at. It was The Beast. It rose up in front of us, blacker than the night.

The roller coaster hovered over the woods like an enormous creature ready to pounce.

Ashley and I stood staring up at the dark tracks for a long time. Black against the fog-covered sky, the tracks stretched up like a mountain, then curved away.

“Cool,” Ashley murmured. “Let's go.”

We crossed the clearing, ducked through an opening in a wood fence, and stepped onto the pavement. Tall spotlights overhead cast dim light over the area. I realized we were standing where the lines formed for The Beast.

Staying in the shadow of the fence, we searched for security guards.

None around.

Then we went running up the ramp onto the platform.

“This is totally weird!” I exclaimed. It had been so crowded an hour earlier, filled with laughing, shouting, screaming people. And now it stood before us, so empty and silent.

“Yeah. Weird,” Ashley agreed. Her eyes flashed excitedly.

We followed the platform to the front, our eyes searching the empty tracks.

The roller coaster cars stood at the far end. They looked bigger without people in them.

A gust of wind rolled over the platform, whistling through the tracks. I heard a soft flapping sound overhead.

A bat?

I glanced up to the platform roof. But it was too dark to see.

“I'll bet we're the only kids ever to see The Beast like this,” Ashley said softly. She walked over to the first car and climbed inside.

“Ashley—what do you think you're doing?” I cried in alarm.

“If we're going to wait for the ghost, we might as well get comfortable,” she replied. She scooted over, making room for me. “Come on, James.” She patted the seat.

“No thanks,” I told her, staying back from the tracks. “I'd rather stand.”

“Come on. Sit down,” she urged. “We can pretend we're roaring over the tracks.”

“I don't like to pretend,” I insisted. “I'm too old to pretend.”

I heard the flapping sound overhead again. It had to be a bat. With a shudder, I let my eyes follow the dark tracks. They rolled out straight for a while before beginning their steep climb.

“When do you think the ghost will come out?” Ashley asked, leaning over the safety bar.

“There's no ghost,” I muttered for the hundredth time. “This is one bet I'm going to win.”

“We'll see,” Ashley replied. “You sure you don't want to sit down?”

I started to reply, but stopped when I heard the loud clanking sound.

The clanking grew louder. The tracks groaned.

“Hey!” Ashley cried out.

I gaped, frozen with horror as the roller coaster cars started to move!

“Help me!” Ashley called from the front of the first car. “James—help!”



“Oh, no!”

I uttered a choked cry as I stared at the cars clanking over the tracks.

The cars were starting to pick up speed. In a few seconds they would make it past the platform.

And so would Ashley.

I saw that she had climbed to her feet and was struggling to climb out.

“James—help!”

Forgetting my fear, I started to run after her, my sneakers slapping the concrete platform.

The empty cars clattered noisily as they bounced over the tracks.

Could I get to her in time?

A few feet from the platform edge, I reached out with both hands.

She grabbed them.

I tugged—and pulled her from the car as it rolled out of sight.

We staggered back over the platform, breathing hard.

I could hear the empty cars making their climb up the steep first hill of the tracks.

“Are you okay?” I asked Ashley.

Her hair was wild around her face. She tugged it back with both hands. “I—I couldn’t get out,” she stammered. “My foot was caught and—”

We both could hear the empty cars rolling above us on the dark tracks. The sound of the clattering wheels echoed eerily off the empty platform.

“Why did the cars start moving?” Ashley asked. “There’s no one around. This is so creepy, James.”

I looked for the usual excited gleam in her eye. But this time I saw only fear.

Hearing another sound, a loud *thunk*, we turned back to the far end of the platform.

And there, through the shadowy light, dancing in the billowing curtain of fog, we saw a figure bent over the controls.

The ghost?



Ashley grabbed my arm. Her hand was as cold as ice.

Staring across the long, mist-covered platform, we saw him. Even in the dim light we could make him out clearly, his white beard, his long white hair hanging down over his shirt collar.

He wore big, old-fashioned-looking overalls over a black, long-sleeved sweater. His hands were on the control levers. His head was lowered in concentration.

He hadn't seen us.

Could he see us? I suddenly wondered.

I've read a lot of science-fiction stories. If he were a ghost from another dimension, I knew he might not be able to see us or communicate with us.

He might live in a totally different world.

But then, how did he get the roller coaster cars to run? I asked myself.

Ashley was still gripping my arm. I had to pull her hand away. She was squeezing so hard, she was hurting me.

"I—I think I just won my bet," she stammered, staring straight at the white-bearded ghost.

"Let's get out of here!" I whispered.

I turned to start down the ramp. But Ashley didn't follow.

I glanced back to see her frozen in place, her hands tensed into tight fists, her eyes wide with fright.

"Ashley—come on!" I called in a loud whisper.

And then I saw the ghost raise his eyes from the controls.

He saw Ashley first. Then me.

He stood up quickly, dropping his hands from the levers. He slid out from behind the control box and took a step toward us.

"Come here!" he boomed.



I swallowed hard. “Ashley—let’s go!” I cried.

She didn’t move. She stared straight ahead at the white-haired ghost as if she were hypnotized or something.

“Come here,” he repeated in his deep, booming voice. “Both of you.” The command echoed off the platform walls.

I hesitated at the top of the ramp. I wanted to run, but knew I couldn’t leave Ashley alone.

“Ashley, please!” I pleaded.

But I saw her begin to move toward the ghost.

“Come over here,” the ghost commanded again, waving both hands.

I took a deep breath and followed Ashley. A loud clatter startled us both. It took me a short while to see that it was the empty roller-coaster cars returning from their trip.

“How did you kids get in here?” the ghost asked. His body shimmered in the fog as if he were part of the mist.

As I edged closer, I could see his steel-gray eyes, almost silver. They peered at us sharply beneath heavy white eyebrows.

He was an old man, but powerfully built. He stood straight and tall like a much younger person. He had a broad chest beneath the overall bib, and big, strong-looking hands.

He was solid. Too solid to be a ghost, I told myself.

Ashley and I were only a few feet from him now. A gust of wind made his long white hair flutter. The wind whistled eerily down the dark tracks.

“We—we accidentally got locked in the park,” Ashley told him.

He stared at her suspiciously. Then he turned his strange gray eyes on me. “What’s your name, son?”

“James Dickson,” I replied quickly. I pointed to Ashley. “She’s my cousin. Ashley Franks.”

“Pleased to meet you,” the old man said. “I’m P. D. Walters.” He stretched out his hand to shake with each of us.

His hand was warm and dry. It didn’t feel like a ghost hand.

I was beginning to think that maybe Ashley hadn’t won the bet after all.

“What does the P.D. stand for?” Ashley asked, studying the old man’s face.

“Pretty Dumb!” he joked. He let out a bellowing laugh that made his massive chest heave up and down. “At least, that’s what most folks say.”

Then, suddenly, all the humor left his face. His gray eyes lost their sparkle, grew dull and thoughtful. He rubbed the heavy white beard. “You kids are going to get caught,” he murmured.

Was it a threat or a warning? I couldn’t tell.

“What do you do here?” Ashley asked, ignoring his comment.

“Test the cars,” he replied, pointing to the train of empty roller coaster cars.

“At night?” Ashley asked.

P.D. nodded. “At night.”

“You mean you work here?” I blurted out. My voice sounded strange. Tight and shrill.

“You might say that,” P.D. answered.

“Have you ever seen a ghost here?” Ashley demanded suddenly.

P.D. let out another bellowing laugh. Then he made his way back behind the controls.

He didn't answer Ashley's question, I realized.

“So you work here every night?” Ashley asked, stepping up in front of the control panel.

“Just about,” P.D. told her. He rested his hands on the two long metal levers that stuck up from the electronic box.

He cleared his throat, then raised his eyes to hers. “I’ve been coming here for over sixty years,” he said. Something in his voice sounded sad to me.

Then I remembered something. “Whoa! Wait a minute,” I said. “Kings Island hasn’t been here for sixty years.”

“I know,” P.D. replied softly. His eyes dimmed. He frowned. “It’s sort of a long, sad story.”

“Tell us!” Ashley insisted eagerly.

P.D. leaned his bulky weight against the platform wall. He motioned for us to come closer. Ashley and I stepped up to the control box.

He scratched his white beard slowly, staring first at Ashley, then at me, as if trying to decide whether to tell his story or not.

He cleared his throat again, a low rumble that started deep in his chest. “Before Kings Island, there was another park on this same spot,” P.D. began. “It was called Firelight Park. That’s because the park was lit by thousands of burning torches.”

“Wow!” Ashley exclaimed. “That must have been beautiful!”

P.D. nodded solemnly. His eyes watered over. His expression remained sad. “It was beautiful,” he said softly. “When I was younger, much much younger, I thought it was the most beautiful spot on earth.”

“And it was right here where we’re standing?” I asked, shoving my hands deep into my jeans pockets.

The old man nodded. “Many years ago.” The wind ruffled his hair. He gripped the control levers. “When I was young, I spent as much time as I could at Firelight Park. I loved the lights, the exciting rides, the carnival shows. I liked being part of the crowds, the happy crowds.”

He sighed, a sad sigh. Then he shut his eyes and remained silent for a moment.

The fog seemed to circle around him in the dim light. His white hair and beard shimmered like wisps of cloud around his solemn, wrinkled face.

“Nothing beautiful lasts,” he murmured softly, opening his gray eyes. “One horrible night it was all gone.”

Ashley and I stared at him. His eyes became as dull as the fog. His broad shoulders slumped forward.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Tornado,” P.D. muttered. “Came without warning. A violent tornado. It swept over the park. It toppled the torches, the thousands of torches. In minutes the entire park was ablaze.”

He shook his head sadly, his eyes focused far away, remembering.

“People died,” he continued. “Hundreds of people died that night. In minutes the park was gone. Gone forever.”

I swallowed hard. “Were you there?” I asked. “Were you there the night of the tornado?”

P.D. nodded. “Oh, yes,” he replied, sighing. “I was there. June 15, 1931. It isn’t a date I shall ever forget.”

Ashley and I exchanged glances. I was suddenly cold all over.

I tried to imagine another amusement park, in another time, over sixty years ago, on this very spot. A park filled with the light of thousands of flickering torches.

I tried to imagine how it could disappear forever in one swoop of a tornado.

But it was too frightening to think about.

P.D.'s voice broke through the chill air. "Now I work here at night," he said quietly, "testing The Beast."

Suddenly his expression changed. A thin smile formed on his lips, and his gray eyes lit up.

He pointed to the empty roller coaster cars. "Want a ride?"

"Huh?" Ashley and I hesitated.

"Maybe we should get going," I said.

"But it would be awesome!" Ashley exclaimed. "Riding The Beast at night through the fog. The only ones on the entire ride!"

"Go ahead. Climb in," P.D. urged. He raised his hands on the long control levers. "Go ahead. I'll give you a good ride."

"Ashley, I don't think we should," I pleaded. "I really think—"

I stopped when I saw the beams of yellow light moving toward us.

Flashlights. Flickering over the pavement, approaching the ramp. At least four or five of them.

Security guards.

"They—they've found us!" I stammered. "We're caught!"

P.D. pointed to the front car. "Quick! Jump in!" he cried. "Hurry!"



Ashley and I took off for the empty car.

I could see the flashlights darting closer. The yellow fog lights cut through the thick fog like lasers. Behind the lights I could see the shadowy figures of the guards.

I reached the cars first and dived into the front seat. With a breathless cry, Ashley scrambled in behind me.

“Hey, stop—” I heard a guard shout.

“Stop them!” another guard cried.

As the safety bar slammed down, I heard the pounding footsteps of the guards as they moved toward us.

But then the footsteps were drowned out by the clatter of wheels as our car pulled away.

We bumped along the track. Ashley and I bounced hard, gripping the safety bar with both hands.

Bright lights invaded my eyes, blinding me for a moment.

“There they are!” I heard a guard shout.

“Stop them! Stop the ride!” another guard cried.

The bright lights rolled over Ashley and me, and then disappeared.

“Whoa!” I shouted as the car tilted up, tossing me back against the seat.

“We’re climbing!” Ashley cried. “This is *so cool!*”

Up, up we climbed through the darkness. I waited for my eyes to adjust. The yellow glare of the guards’ flashlights lingered in my eyes.

The car creaked as it climbed, pressing us back against the seats. Gazing up, I saw nothing but fog blanketing the sky.

“We got away!” Ashley shouted happily. “James—we got away! This is totally awesome!”

We may have gotten away, but only for a few minutes. When the ride ended, the guards would be waiting for us on the platform.

I started to remind Ashley of this fact. But before I could get a word out, we reached the top of the steep hill—and the car went roaring straight down over the dark tracks.

“YAAAAIIIIII!”

We both were screaming our heads off now.

It was the most amazing feeling. Plunging through the darkness. All alone. Just the two of us.

The car swung sharply and tilted hard, tossing us together. Then we bounced hard up a sharp incline. The car then straightened out and picked up speed.

I gripped the safety bar and stared out at the dark trees as they flashed by. Limbs poked out of the fog like bony black arms. Clouds of fog floated over the tracks.

The wind rushed at my face, cool and wet.

We both screamed as we plunged into a low tunnel. When we shot out, the fog appeared thicker. Heavier.

It seemed to wrap itself around us. Move with us.

We were part of the fog, swirling, floating, spinning around the tracks.

Ashley became a dim shadow beside me. We were both dim shadows now. Shadows inside of shadows. Plunging through the wind, through the heavy, wet wind, through the pulsing,

throbbing darkness.

The ride would end soon, I knew.

But I didn't know what awaited us. I couldn't know the terror at the end of the tracks.



The car slowed, then rolled to a stop.

Ashley and I sat without moving for a moment, breathing hard, waiting for the dizziness to fade.

I turned to the platform, expecting to see the bright flashlights and the dark figures behind the lights.

But the platform lay dark and empty.

“Hey—they’re gone,” I whispered.

“The guards? They’re not here?” Ashley asked breathlessly.

We stood up and climbed out of the car. Ashley was pushing back her thick hair with both hands. My legs felt kind of wobbly, but my head was clear.

I gazed down the long, dark platform—and realized that the fog had disappeared.

“Hey!” I cried out, startled. “Ashley, look!” I pointed up to a sky full of twinkling stars.

“Huh?” She didn’t catch on at first.

“How did the fog lift so fast?” I demanded. “A few seconds ago it was so thick, we couldn’t see!”

Ashley shook her head. “I don’t get it. Where’s P.D.?”

I was so startled that no guards were waiting for us, so surprised to stare up into a clear sky that I had forgotten all about him.

I turned toward the control panel at the front of the platform. “P.D.?”

No one there. The control box stood in darkness.

Ashley and I gazed up and down the platform. We were the only ones there.

“Weird,” she muttered.

I suddenly heard music. Very faint. Floating over the soft night air.

Ashley heard it, too. “It sounds like someone playing an organ,” she said.

“The park is closed,” I reminded her. “Who would be playing music now?”

“Let’s check it out,” she said.

We made our way off the platform and through the exit area. As we walked, the music grew louder.

Over the music I could suddenly hear voices. Laughter. Kids shouting.

“What’s going *on*?” I cried.

We made our way through a narrow gap in a wooden fence—and stepped into a bright, crowded scene.

Flickering torches on tall poles marked both sides of a wide boardwalk. I saw a row of low game booths, brightly painted signs, food stands, long lines of people.

But it all looked different. It all was totally changed. The park. The people. Everything.

“James—” Ashley cried, grabbing the sleeve of my T-shirt. “This isn’t Kings Island. It’s weird. Where are we?”

She gripped my sleeve tighter as we both gaped in amazement.

“Where are we, James?” Ashley repeated shrilly. “Where *are* we?”



Our mouths open in surprise, we walked side by side, following the twin rows of torches. Past the game booths stood an old-fashioned carousel with pink and white horses spinning gracefully.

A high white building stood across from it. The sign over the wide entrance proclaimed ANGLUND'S WILD ANIMAL SHOW.

"Everyone is dressed so weird!" Ashley exclaimed.

I had to agree with her. I didn't see anyone in jeans. Everyone was *too* dressed up for an amusement park. Most of the men wore dark hats. A lot of them were in sports jackets and ties. Their pants were baggy, pleated in front.

Two boys ran past in long brown shorts and striped T-shirts. They had heavy leather shoes on their feet. No sneakers.

The women and girls all wore dresses or skirts. The dresses were solid colors or flower prints and had big shoulders. Most of the skirts came down nearly to the women's ankles.

"Wow. Look at those high-heeled shoes," Ashley exclaimed. "Who would wear high heels to an amusement park?"

"The hair styles are weird, too," I said. "It's like we stepped into an old black-and-white movie on TV."

My comment made us both stop and stare at each other.

I think we had the feeling that something very mysterious had just happened to us. And I think at that moment we both knew where we were.

"We—we're in Firelight Park," Ashley stammered, her eyes gazing all around.

"But—how?" I managed to choke out.

Ashley didn't reply. She was staring at the flickering torches that lined all the walkways. "This is—impossible," she murmured finally. "Impossible."

We both shook our heads, staring at this strange park in disbelief.

How did we get here?

How would we get back to Kings Island?

Were we trapped here? Trapped here forever?

These frightening questions flashed through my mind.

"I feel scared and excited and curious and terrified all at the same time!" Ashley exclaimed.

I nodded. "Me, too," I choked out.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

Two teenage boys wearing big blue sport shirts buttoned up to the collar and wide brown pants pushed past us. I followed them with my eyes. They were hurrying to a tall building in front of us.

A long line had formed in front of the entrance to the building. A sign made of hundreds of red and blue light bulbs proclaimed RIDE THE SHOOT-THE-CHUTE!

"What is the Shoot-the-Chute?" Ashley demanded.

I shrugged. "Some kind of water ride, I'd guess."

I suddenly noticed that people were staring at us. Mostly they were staring at Ashley.

Because of her clothes, I guessed. She had to be the only girl in sight in Day-Glo orange

shorts, a sleeveless T-shirt, and white high-tops.

People were staring at my pump sneakers, too. And I guess my faded jeans with holes at both knees and my Heavy Metal Headbangers T-shirt were a little out of place.

“I feel like some kind of freak,” Ashley complained. “Why are they staring at me like that?”

“*They’re* the ones who are dressed funny!” I cried.

“I don’t like this,” Ashley said, her voice trembling. “I really don’t like this, James.”

“Hey—you wanted an adventure, right?” I replied. I tried to sound cheerful. I was probably as frightened as Ashley. Maybe more frightened.

I watched her chin tremble and her eyes start to tear up. I didn’t want her to lose it. So I forced myself to sound cheerful. Like I was having a good time. Not a care in the world.

“It’s so hot,” I said, wiping my forehead with one hand. “Let’s get some ice cream.”

I led the way to a small white cart with a green- and white-striped umbrella over it. A short, chubby man in a long white apron leaned over the cart. He had shiny slicked-down black hair and a thin black mustache.

He lifted himself off the cart as Ashley and I stepped up. “What’ll it be?” he asked.

“Do you have frozen yogurt?” Ashley asked.

The man narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re a little late for April Fool’s Day, miss,” he said.

“No. Really. Frozen yogurt,” Ashley repeated.

The man frowned. “Why would anyone freeze yogurt?”

“Ashley,” I whispered. “He doesn’t have it.” I turned back to the ice-cream man. He was staring at Ashley’s outfit.

“Do you have rocky road?” I asked.

He rolled his eyes. “Another joker. You two are Abbott and Costello, huh?”

“I’ll have praline ice cream,” Ashley said.

The man’s skinny little mustache twitched, as if it were about to jump off his face. He rubbed his chin with a chubby hand. “You two are funny. You should go on the radio. You dress funny, too. Where’d you get those costumes?”

“What flavors do you have?” I asked.

“Vanilla and chocolate, naturally,” he said, rolling his dark eyes impatiently. “And I’ve got tutti-frutti.”

“*Tutti-what?*” Ashley asked shrilly. “What’s that?”

I could see the man was starting to get angry. And glancing behind us, I saw that a small crowd had gathered. Our strange clothing was attracting attention.

“We’ll have two vanilla cones,” I said quickly.

The man nodded, opened the lid on the white cart, and began scooping ice cream into two cones. I dug into my jeans pocket and felt a couple of dollar bills. I hoped it would be enough to pay for the cones.

“That’ll be four cents,” the man said, handing us two double-scoop cones.

“Ashley—a double-dip cone for two cents!” I cried in surprise.

Her mouth had dropped open in shock.

“Have you got it or not?” the man asked, hands at the waist of his apron.

I pulled a nickel from my pocket. “Keep the change,” I told him. Big spender.

“Can you tell me what year this is?” Ashley asked suddenly.

The man’s wormlike mustache twitched again. He narrowed his eyes at her. “What did you ask me?”

“What year is this?” Ashley repeated as if it were a perfectly normal question to be asking an ice-cream man at an amusement park.

The man didn’t reply. He shook his head and muttered something about kids today. He gave us a weary little wave. “See you in the funny papers,” he said, and turned away from us.

Ashley and I walked away, licking our enormous cones. The ice cream was really good, sweet and creamy.

As we walked, I noticed that people stared and pointed at us. “Funny costumes,” I heard a woman say. “Are they in the circus show?”

“We’ve got to do something,” Ashley whispered. She had a white ice-cream mustache over her mouth. The cones were very drippy.

“We’ve got to find P.D.,” I said. “He’ll know what to do. And he’ll probably know how to get us home.”

“Don’t say *probably*,” Ashley said shrilly. “He’s *got* to know how to get us home. He’s *got* to!”

We wandered through the crowd, trying to ignore the stares and comments. The line had grown longer at the Shoot-the-Chute. We also passed a long line at a ride called Moon Rocket.

Peering into the entrance, I saw a long rocket ship, very old-fashioned looking, with dozens of little cars like little train cars. It looked more like a huge caterpillar than a rocket. It was wrapped around a circular track.

And when the cars were filled with passengers, the rocket spun around the track, faster and faster. The passengers squealed and shouted, even though they weren’t going as fast as a roller coaster.

I guess they thought it was pretty fast though.

“Hey—James!” Ashley pulled me away from the entrance.

I spun around, trying to see what she was pointing at.

“It’s P.D.!” she cried, starting across the crowded plaza.

Staring into the bright light of the tall torches, I saw him against a low fence. I recognized the long white hair and the baggy denim overalls.

“Hurry!” Ashley cried, pushing her way through the crowd.

She didn’t have to tell me to hurry. I was just as eager to talk to P.D. as Ashley was.

Now maybe we’ll find out what’s going on here, I thought.

He’s got to get us out of here. He’s *got* to!

“Hey, P.D.!” Ashley called.

When he turned around, we both gasped.



“P.D.?” Ashley’s voice sank.

The white-haired man spun around. His dark eyes glanced back at us through heavy black-rimmed glasses. He held a stubby black pipe in his teeth. No beard.

Ashley and I both saw at once that it wasn’t P.D.

The man turned to his wife and pointed at us. I guessed he was commenting on our weird outfits.

Ashley sighed and shook her head.

“Keep searching,” I said. “We’ll find him.”

We walked past a small square park. A crowd had gathered in front of a white bandstand. On the low stage a quartet wearing straw hats and red- and white-striped shirts was singing a slow song.

“It’s a barbershop quartet,” Ashley said.

“Well, I could tell it wasn’t a rap group!” I exclaimed sarcastically.

We stopped for a moment to search the crowd. No sign of P.D.

The four singers leaned close together. They were singing something about an old Kentucky home.

Ashley and I started walking again. A strong breeze came up, making the torch flames flutter. Our shadows grew longer.

We passed a small food stand selling Coney Island dogs. In the far distance I could see a Ferris wheel, dark against the purple sky.

The wind fluttered Ashley’s hair. She didn’t seem to notice. Her eyes were narrowed, searching for P.D.

An idea popped into my head. “Hey—I bet he’s waiting for us back at The Beast,” I said.

“Maybe,” Ashley replied. The wind blew her hair over her forehead. She pushed it back with both hands.

“Which way is The Beast?” I asked. “I’m all turned around.”

“Let’s ask that guard,” Ashley said.

Across the walkway, a guard in a blue uniform leaned against a narrow wooden booth. It looked like those photo-developing booths they have in malls, except it was painted blue.

We jogged over to him. “Which way is The Beast?” Ashley asked eagerly.

He stared back at us with cold brown eyes. He adjusted his blue cap as he studied us.

“Which way is The Beast?” Ashley repeated.

He frowned. “What’s The Beast?”

“You know. The roller coaster,” Ashley repeated impatiently.

“You mean the Shoot-the-Chute? It’s over there.” He pointed.

“No. It’s called The Beast,” I said. “It’s back in the woods. But we lost our way and—”

“I see you lost your clothes, too,” the guard said sternly.

“Can you tell us where The Beast is?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Try the wild animal show. They’ve got the only beasts I’ve ever heard of.”

“But—but—” I stammered.

The guard narrowed his eyes at Ashley. "I'm sorry, miss. But I really can't allow you to walk around in your underwear like that."

Ashley's mouth dropped open. "Huh? My underwear?"

"An undershirt and shorts are not proper attire," the guard said. "Are your parents in the park?"

"No," Ashley muttered.

"Well, wait right here. I'll get someone to take you to the office. You can call them to come pick you up."

Ashley and I exchanged glances. "That would be a real long distance call!" Ashley told the guard.

The guard scowled. "I can't let you walk around like that. Just wait here."

"No way!" Ashley cried.

She wheeled around and started to run. I was a few steps behind her. But I stopped short, nearly colliding with a baby carriage.

"Stop! Stop right there!" I heard the guard scream.

He grabbed for me with both hands.

I ducked away. Fell. Landed hard on my knees. My poor knees were having a rough night!

Glancing up, I saw Ashley running full speed through the startled people in the crowd.

I struggled to my feet. But the guard was right behind me.

I couldn't get away.

I was caught.



I stood up, swallowing hard, and waited for him to grab me.

But to my shock, he ran right past. “Stop her! Stop that girl!” he shouted.

I realized he wasn’t interested in me. He only wanted to catch Ashley.

Shaking my head hard, as if shaking off a close call, I followed him. I saw Ashley turn a corner into a crowded area. I turned the corner too, but I lost sight of her.

People jammed the narrow walkway between two rows of brightly lit carnival booths. As I hurried past, searching for Ashley, I saw dart games, water balloon games, ring toss games.

“Win a Kewpie doll!” a man shouted through a megaphone. “Everyone’s a winner! Win a Kewpie doll for your cutie!”

I had to slow to a walk. The crowd was too thick to run.

I couldn’t see Ashley or the guard.

The wind whipped through the walkway. Women cried out and grabbed their skirts. Men held on to their hats. The flames of the tall torches flickered and bent.

A line had formed in front of a sideshow stage, blocking the street. I searched frantically for Ashley, but didn’t see her.

I was starting to get that heavy feeling of dread in my stomach again. What if I couldn’t find her?

On the sideshow platform, a man with a black mustache and oily, slicked-down black hair held a megaphone to his mouth. He wore a straw hat and a flashy, red- and black-striped sport jacket.

“See the two-headed boy!” he called into the megaphone, his shrill voice floating over the crowd. “It’s real. It’s all real, folks. The boy has two heads. You can count ’em for yourself!”

I pushed deeper into the crowd, searching for Ashley.

“Hurry, hurry! The show is about to begin. Two bits is all it takes, folks. Two bits to see the wonders of the known universe. See the amazing Elastic Woman! And her husband, the incredible Lobster Man! When she wraps him in her arms, she really wraps him, folks! But watch out—he pinches!”

Some people laughed. The crowd surged forward. I was forced to move along with it.

Another blast of wind made everyone reach for their hats.

Ducking my head, I pried myself free from the crowd. I turned the corner and was heading around the back of the sideshow—when someone grabbed my shoulder.

“Huh?” I spun around. “Ashley!”

“Quick—in here!” She pulled me to the back door of the sideshow building. Then she opened the door and slipped inside before I could protest.

We found ourselves in a steamy, dark room. A dim red lamp provided the only light.

I could hear low, murmuring voices nearby. And through the thin walls I could hear the carnival barker out front. “Hurry, hurry!” he was shouting. “The show is about to begin! You don’t want to keep the Wild Man of Borneo waiting—do you, folks?”

My eyes were slowly adjusting to the dark. I turned and stared into Ashley’s troubled face. “I—I think we lost that guard,” she whispered.

“Then let’s get out of here!” I urged.

She grabbed my arm. “But what are we going to do? That guard said there is no Beast here. He’d never heard of it. How are we going to find P.D.?”

“Maybe the guard is new here,” I suggested. “Maybe he doesn’t know his way around yet.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Ashley rolled her eyes. “Be serious, James. What are we going to do?”

“We’ll just have to keep looking,” I said. I pulled my arm free. “Hey—you’re supposed to be the brave, adventurous one, remember?”

That made her smile. “Guess I forgot.”

“Let’s go find a map of the park,” I suggested. “Then maybe we can—”

I stopped when I felt a cold, wet hand on my arm.

“Come on, let go, Ashley,” I whispered.

She gaped at me. “I’m not touching you.”

With a gasp, I turned to see a strange-looking teenage boy grinning at me. His face was shadowy and evil in the dim red light. His black eyes were wide, and his mouth appeared to be locked in its jagged grin.

“I’m the Jelly Boy,” he said in a weird singsong. His cold, wet hand patted my arm, giving me chills.

“I’m the Jelly Boy,” he repeated. “I’m a good boy. I’m the Jelly Boy.”



He wrapped his cold, slimy hand around my hand. His arms and legs seemed soft and rubbery, like jelly. His grinning face was inches from mine. His breath smelled sour.

“I’m the Jelly Boy,” he chanted. “I’m a good boy.”

“Nice to meet you,” I choked out. “My friend and I—we’re leaving now.”

I tried to slide my hand free. But he held on. His hand was so wet and cold, I had shivers running down my back.

“I’m the Jelly Boy. I’m the Jelly Boy.” His grin never moved.

“Ashley—let’s go!” I cried.

She started backing toward the door—then cried out.

I followed her gaze. A two-headed boy stepped out of the shadows into the red light. His left head was sort of tilted at an odd angle. The other head stood straight. All four eyes stared directly at us.

“Who are you?” the right head demanded in a surprisingly deep voice.

Before Ashley or I could reply, an enormous woman waddled into the room. She was so wide, she had trouble squeezing through the doorway. She wore a huge white dress, bigger than a camping tent. Her face was as round as a balloon, and she had at least twelve chins.

“What’s going on?” she asked sharply.

“Uh—we’re leaving,” I managed to say in a trembling voice.

“No, you’re not,” the two-headed boy replied, moving quickly to block the door.

“You’re staying with us,” Jelly Boy whispered, bouncing on his rubbery, jellylike legs.

“You’re staying with us forever,” the two-headed boy said.



The strange, frightening weirdos started to close in on us.

I glanced at Ashley. She was tugging at her hair with both hands, her eyes wide with fright. “Let us *out!*” she shouted at them.

She turned to the door. But the two-headed boy was still blocking the way.

Suddenly a shrill voice boomed out from the front of the room. “Show time, guys. What’s the delay?”

We all turned to stare at the carnival barker. He took off his straw hat and dropped it on a table beside his megaphone. “Let’s not keep the fans waiting. Get a move on!” he ordered them.

“Wanda, get your beard on. Artie, straighten your head. It’s falling off your shoulder. Come on, guys.” His eyes went wide when he finally noticed Ashley and me.

“Hey—get those kids out of here!” he cried. “Are you guys scaring kids again? Don’t you remember what happened in Dayton? Those poor kids will have nightmares for the rest of their lives.”

The huge woman waddled away, pressing a beard up to her chin. The two-headed boy grumbled loudly as he struggled to straighten his fake head on his shoulder.

“Jelly, open the door. Get these kids out of here. Now!” the barker ordered.

“Okay, okay. I hear you!” the Jelly Boy muttered.

A few seconds later Ashley and I found ourselves back outside. The wind had picked up. It was ruffling the pennants on top of the game booths, making them rattle. The torches all down the walkway flickered low, almost blowing out.

“That was creepy,” I said as we headed away from the carnival area.

“It was all a fake,” Ashley murmured. Then she froze in place and her eyes went wide.

“James—run!” she cried.

I turned back to follow her frightened gaze.

Blue-uniformed park guards. There were four of them now.

They saw us—and were running after us.

We wanted to run. But we were standing in front of a solid brick wall.



“Quick—give me a boost!” Ashley cried. She turned to the wall and raised both arms, reaching for the top.

“There isn’t time!” I shouted, watching the four guards pick their way through the crowd.

But I bent down and cupped one of her sneakers in my hands—and lifted.

Her hands grazed the top of the wall. “Oh!” she cried out as her sneaker slipped out of my hands and she dropped back to the ground.

“Hold your horses!” one of the dark-uniformed guards cried. “Don’t try to run!”

We were caught.

I let out a long sigh and waited for them to circle us.

But as they came running across the crowded walkway, I saw a frantic-looking man and woman step up and block their path.

“Our baby!” the woman cried.

“Have you seen a baby?” the man asked. “A little one?”

“She was in a carriage,” the woman added in a trembling voice.

The guards were forced to stop. I bent quickly, grabbed Ashley’s sneaker again, and with a loud groan boosted her up to the top of the wall.

Then I leaped as high as I could, grabbed the top, and scrambled over.

“Ow!” I scraped both knees again as I slid down the other side.

I glanced up. We were back in the small park where the barbershop quartet had been singing. The concert music must have ended. The park was nearly deserted.

Ashley was already on her feet and running. Ignoring my throbbing knees, I started after her—and bumped into someone.

We both cried out in surprise.

It was a boy. About our age. Twelve, maybe thirteen.

He had wavy brown hair that looked like it hadn’t been brushed in years. He was sort of shabby.

His red- and blue-striped T-shirt was faded and stained, and one sleeve was torn. His wide brown pants stopped just below his knees.

“Watch where you’re going!” he cried angrily, rubbing his side.

“Sorry,” I murmured. “I was running and—”

“Can you help us?” Ashley asked breathlessly, appearing behind me. “We’ve got to hide.”

“How can you hide in those strange clothes?” the boy asked, pointing at Ashley’s Day-Glo shorts. “Are you a circus act or something?”

“No. We—uh— I mean—” I stammered.

“We don’t have time to explain,” Ashley said impatiently. “Do you know a good place to hide?”

The boy tossed back his brown hair. He stared from Ashley to me. “First, let’s get you some real duds,” he said.

“Some real *what?*” I demanded.

“You know. Duds. Clothes,” he replied, eyeing me curiously. “Where are you from, anyway?”

“Pretty far from here,” I told him.

Ashley’s eyes were on the wall. The guards would be climbing after us any second. “Please—let’s get moving,” she pleaded.

“Okay. Follow me,” the boy said. He began to trot across the grass.

We followed him out of the small park onto the crowded walkway that led back to the carnival area. “By the way, my name is Paul,” he said.

We told him our names. Our eyes were darting over the crowd, searching for guards. Each time we turned a corner, I expected to be grabbed.

The wind swirled and gusted. It blew a woman’s wide-brimmed hat into a small fishpond. She started yelling at her husband to wade in and pull it out for her. He didn’t seem too happy about the idea.

Ashley and I tried to stay in the shadows as we followed Paul through the park. After what seemed hours, we came to a place called the service area.

Paul led us into a square white-shingled building. We found ourselves in a musty-smelling room. Paul pointed to several large cardboard cartons against one wall. A sign above the cartons read USED CLOTHING DROP.

“Maybe you can find something that fits,” he told us. “Go ahead. Hurry up and change. At least you won’t look like freaks!”

Freaks?

Ashley and I hurried over to the cartons, which were piled to the top with old clothing. It was like the stuff you see in antique stores.

Ashley rummaged through a carton and pulled out a long straight brown skirt with a ruffled hem. She pulled it on over her shorts. “Hey, it fits!” she cried happily.

A few seconds later she pulled out a frilly, lacy white blouse. “This is like when I was little,” Ashley said, pulling the blouse over her sleeveless T-shirt. “I used to go up to my grandmother’s attic and try on her old clothes.

She spun around. “How do I look?”

“Like your grandmother,” I told her.

I bent down and tried to find something that would fit me. Paul had his eyes trained on the entrance. Ashley was twirling around in the weird skirt and blouse.

“Why do they have old clothing at an amusement park?” she asked Paul.

“You know. For the unemployed people,” Paul replied without turning around. “The park has a lot of services for the poor.”

“Really?” Ashley cried, surprised.

“Well, there *is* a Depression going on,” Paul replied sharply.

I pulled out a pair of knee-length brown pants like Paul’s. And I found a Hawaiian-style sport shirt, all yellow and blue flowers, that might fit okay.

I remembered we read something about the Depression in a history unit. It was a long time ago, when a lot of people were out of work and everyone was poor.

I wanted to ask Paul more about it. But I knew I couldn’t. Paul would wonder why I didn’t know about it. And I knew there was no way to explain to him about Ashley and me.

I couldn’t explain it to myself!

I went into the back room, tugged off my jeans and T-shirt, and pulled on the outfit from the carton. The clothes smelled a little moldy, but they almost fit.

I felt like a real dork with pants that didn’t come all the way down. At least the Hawaiian

sport shirt was kind of cool.

How could people wear this stuff? I wondered.

Well, at least it will be easier to keep away from the guards in these clothes, I told myself. As I adjusted the pants, my gaze stopped at my white pump sneakers. Should I trade them in, too?

I had seen a carton of shoes in the other room, big clunky brown and black shoes. Maybe—

“No way!” I cried out loud.

No way was I leaving my pumps behind.

I stepped back into the front room and stretched out my arms. “Hey, Ashley, what do you think?”

My mouth dropped open as I glanced around the room. I let out a startled gasp.

Ashley and Paul were gone.



“Hey!”

I stared around the empty room, my heart pounding. “What’s the big idea?”

Had Ashley been caught by the guards? Dragged away?

I hurried out the front door—and straight into them both.

Ashley caught the frantic expression on my face. “Paul and I ran out,” she explained. “I thought I saw P.D.”

“Who is P.D.?” Paul asked.

“We have to find him,” Ashley replied breathlessly. “James and I have been searching everywhere for him. We have to find him right away.”

A blue-uniformed security guard approached. He was whistling to himself, walking slowly. He stopped whistling when he saw the three of us.

Oh, no, I thought, feeling my stomach tighten with dread. *Caught again?*

I swallowed hard.

The guard started whistling again. He walked right past us.

I realized I’d been holding my breath. I let it out in a long *whoosh*. “These costumes worked!” I exclaimed.

“What does P.D. look like?” Paul asked.

“He’s an old man with long white hair and a bushy white beard,” Ashley told him. “Sort of like Santa Claus.”

“The last time we saw him, he was wearing huge overalls,” I added. “Denim overalls. Over a black sweater.”

“He shouldn’t be too hard to find,” Paul replied.

“We *have* to find him,” Ashley said, her voice shrill and frightened. “We have to find him or we can’t get home.”



We searched for a long time. It seemed like hours.

No sign of P.D.

I suddenly realized I was starving. I led Ashley and Paul up to a food stand. A bright electric sign over the counter read CONEY ISLAND DOGS. *Fit For A Millionaire*.

I peered behind the counter to see several hot dogs sizzling on a wide grill. So *that’s* what Coney Island dogs are! I told myself.

I turned to Ashley and Paul. “How many do you want? I could eat a dozen!”

“Just one,” Ashley said. “With lots of mustard.”

Paul lowered his eyes. “None for me,” he muttered. “I—uh—don’t have any money.”

“I’ll treat you,” I told him. “You helped us get these clothes.” I turned to the white-aproned counterman. He wore a tall white chefs hat. “How much are they?” I asked.

“Three cents,” he replied in a gruff voice. “How many?”

“Three with lots of mustard,” I told him. I turned to Ashley. “If we lived here, we’d be rich!” I exclaimed.

Paul looked puzzled.

“Where we live, hot dogs cost more than a dollar,” Ashley explained.

“Stop teasing me,” Paul said, smiling. “No one would pay a dollar for a Coney.” His smile faded. “Are you really rich?”

I felt all the change in my pockets. I knew I had at least five dollars in my wallet. “We’re rich tonight!” I declared.

“Can we go on the Shoot-the-Chute?” Paul asked. “I never have enough money to ride it. Or anything else,” he added sadly.

“We have to keep searching for P.D.,” Ashley told him.

“But maybe we can do some rides on the way,” I said.

As we gobbled down our hot dogs, Paul told us he came to Firelight Park just about every night. He couldn’t afford the admission. It cost a dime to get in. So he sneaked in through a hole in the fence back near the woods.

He told us he had four brothers and sisters, and his family lived in a two-room apartment above a dry-cleaning store. “I work during the day, delivering the dry cleaning,” Paul said. “I don’t get paid a salary. But sometimes the customers give me a few pennies as a tip.”

He finished his Coney in about two seconds. I bought him another one. I could tell he was really hungry.

“Of course I give all my money to my family,” he continued. “You see, my dad lost his job when the stock market crashed. He goes out every morning, trying to find work. But there are so many men looking for jobs” His voice trailed off.

I ordered three more Coney Island dogs, and gave the counterman a dime. We gobbled them up quickly. They were really good.

“Let’s take Paul on some rides,” I whispered to Ashley.

“Okay.” She nodded. “I guess we can watch for P.D. on the way.”

We made our way through the crowd. The tall torches flickered as we passed, making our shadows dance in front of us.

Paul led the way to a building called The Human Whirlpool. It was really a simple ride. A huge wooden disc stretched across the center of the floor. People crowded onto the disc and sat down. Then the disc began to spin, faster and faster, making everyone tumble and fall all over one another.

We came out laughing, staggering, bumping into one another.

We headed next to a ride called The Air-Flo Dodgem Cars. It was almost like the bumper cars they have at parks today. Except the cars were rounder and taller and didn’t move quite as fast.

After the dodgem cars, we were ready for the Shoot-the-Chute. It turned out to be a kind of water-log-roller coaster ride. It was as high as a roller coaster—and everyone had to walk up to the top! No car to carry us up.

Once we got to the top, we climbed into cars that looked like long logs. Then we shot down a watery track, curving to a pond, where we hit with a splash.

“Thank you! That was swell!” Paul declared when we came out. “You two are real pals!” He had a big smile on his face.

That made me feel really good. I’m sure it made Ashley feel good, too.

“What should we do next?” I asked, jingling the change in my pockets.

“I think we should search for P.D.,” Ashley replied. In the flickering torchlight her expression was tense and frightened.

I was having so much fun, I had nearly forgotten about P.D.

The wind suddenly blew hard, a strong, warm gust that fluttered booth awnings and made the trees shake and whisper.

“Hey!” I cried out as an open newspaper flew along the walkway and wrapped itself around my ankles.

As I bent to pull it off me, my eyes fell on the date on the top of the page—and I gasped.

June 15, 1931.

“Ashley—I-look!” I stammered. I shoved the newspaper into her face.

It fluttered and flapped in the wind. She couldn’t read it.

“It’s June fifteenth!” I cried. “Ashley—it’s 1931. Don’t you remember?”

Her mouth dropped open. She grabbed the newspaper with both hands and stared at the date on the page.

“The night of the tornado!” I cried.

Stunned, Ashley let go of the newspaper and the wind carried it away. “James—what are we going to do?”



“Tornado? What tornado? It’s just a little windy,” Paul said. He glanced up at the sky that was now starless. “Probably going to rain.”

“You don’t understand!” Ashley cried shrilly. “There’s going to be a tornado! A terrible tornado!”

A slow grin crossed Paul’s face. I could see he thought we were joking. “You’re pulling my leg, right?”

“No,” I told him. “We’re serious, Paul. We’ve got to warn everyone!”

“Everyone has to leave the park!” Ashley cried. “Everyone has to get out!”

“You *mean* it?” Paul demanded, still confused.

The wind was blowing really steadily now. Hats were blowing across the ground. Women grabbed their skirts and held them down. People were laughing, raising their faces to the wind, enjoying the excitement.

Only Ashley and I knew that the excitement would soon turn to terror.

But what could we do? How could we warn everyone?

How could we get everyone out in time?

“Let’s tell those two guards!” Ashley cried, pointing to two uniformed men leaning against a white information booth.

She dodged around a group of laughing teenagers who had their arms outstretched and were pretending to fly through the soaring wind. Then she went running to the guards.

Paul and I hurried after her.

“You’ve got to clear the park—now!” Ashley screamed breathlessly.

The two guards stared at her, their expressions not changing.

“You’ve got to get everyone out! A tornado is coming!” Ashley cried.

The guards exchanged glances. One of them had a thin blond mustache. His lips twisted into a smile beneath it. “Afraid of a little wind?” he asked in a mocking voice.

Ashley sputtered angrily.

“No—listen to her! She’s right!” I stepped in. “It’s going to be a terrible tornado. Clear the park! Clear the park!”

The guard with the mustache yawned. “Beat it, kids,” he said in a bored voice.

“Go see the sideshow,” his partner chimed in. “They’ve got lots of jokers over there.”

“You don’t understand!” Ashley shrieked frantically, raising both fists in frustration. “We *know* it’s coming! We *know* it’s going to destroy the whole park! You’ve *got* to listen to us! We come from the future!”

Both guards burst out laughing.

“Go have a good time, kids,” the mustached guard said, waving us away. “And say hello to Buck Rogers for us!”

“Say hi to Flash Gordon, too!” his partner said, laughing.

Ashley choked out a cry of frustration. She lowered her fists to her sides.

We turned and walked away from the laughing guards.

“Why did you tell him you’re from the future?” Paul asked, scratching his long brown hair. “I don’t get it. Why do you think a tornado is headed this way?”

“We don’t have time to explain,” Ashley replied, frowning up at the flickering torches.

“She’s right,” I said, my eyes searching the long boardwalk. “We’ve got to find P.D.”

“He told us he was here this night, the night of the tornado,” Ashley said thoughtfully. “So we’ve just got to keep looking. We’ve got to search every inch of the park till we find him.”

Suddenly another idea flashed into my mind. “Ashley—maybe the park has a loudspeaker system. You know. For making announcements from the main office.”

“Yes!” Ashley cried, her eyes lighting up. “That’s a great idea!” She turned excitedly to Paul. “Paul, where’s the main office? Can you take us there?”

Paul pointed. “It’s that way. Near the front gate. But—”

“We’ll tell them to make an announcement!” Ashley cried, hurrying off in the direction Paul had pointed. “They can announce that the park is closed, that everyone has to leave.”

“And they can ask P.D. to come to the front gate,” I added, trotting after her. “They can call him to the front gate—then he can tell us how to get home!”

It seemed like a good plan. Simple, really.

If it worked, it would save a lot of lives—and get us back to our time.

If it didn’t work . . .

Well, I didn’t want to think about that.

As the three of us jogged through the crowds to the main office, I was struck by the amazing stillness.

It was so quiet. The air hung heavily over us.

So still. Nothing moved. Not a tree leaf trembled.

I felt a cold chill down my back as I realized what it was.

The calm before the storm.



A hush seemed to have fallen over the entire park. We ran through the eerie quiet.

Far away, I could hear the sound of the carousel.

The crowd became a blur of smiling faces as we ran. People were gazing up at the sky. It had become a strange yellow gray. As if it had been painted over.

“Hurry!” Ashley cried.

Paul and I were right behind her.

“There it is!” Paul shouted, pointing.

Across a wide plaza stood a long, low redbrick building. The row of windows all along the side was dark.

Breathing hard, we stopped at the double glass doors.

Dark inside. Completely black.

Ashley tugged frantically at one of the doors. It didn’t budge. She tried the other one.

Then I noticed the chain tied through the door handles. A brass padlock hung from the chain.

“What do you kids want?” a stern voice called.

All three of us turned to see a tall, lanky guard. He had a long, slender horse face. His blue cap was tilted back on his head, revealing straight, straw-colored hair. His dark eyes were narrowed suspiciously at us.

“We—we have to make an announcement!” I managed to cry.

“We have to get inside! We have to close the park!” Ashley told him in a shrill, desperate voice.

“Office is closed,” the guard replied calmly. His long jaw was moving. He was chewing gum, I realized. He motioned toward the dark glass doors. “They all go home at five-thirty. Lucky stiffs.”

“But we have to close the park!” Ashley insisted, still clutching the door handles. “We have to warn everyone—”

“Storm’s coming up,” the guard said, slowly raising his eyes to the sky. “Never saw a sky that yellow. Did you?”

“*You don’t understand!*” Ashley screamed. “It’s a tornado! People will be killed! We have to tell them to go home!”

The guard chewed his gum slowly. He stared at Ashley as if he didn’t understand a word she was saying.

“It’s just going to rain a little,” he said finally. “The wind has already stopped.”

“No. She’s right—” I started. “The tornado—”

But he raised a big, bony-fingered hand to stop me. “Office is closed,” he repeated in the same calm voice. “No way to make any kind of announcement.”

“Then how can we clear the park?” Ashley cried.

The guard shrugged. “Can’t,” he said. “Why don’t you kids go have some fun?” he suggested, tilting the hat back to scratch his head. “Are your parents around? Maybe you should go find them if you’re scared of the storm.”

I let out an exasperated sigh. I could see this guard wasn’t going to be any help. We were

wasting time—precious time.

The sky had become even stranger, yellow with eerie gray streaks through it. Far in the distance, I thought I could hear the twisting howl of the approaching tornado.

“Ashley, let’s go,” I murmured, grabbing her arm.

But she pulled away from me and returned to the lanky guard. “Is there any way to call somebody to the gate? Is there any way at all? We need to see a man named P. D. Walters. Is there any way to call for P. D. Walters over the loudspeaker?”

The guard shook his head. “There *is* no loudspeaker,” he said. “No way to announce anything, as far as I know.” His expression hardened. “Run along now, okay? You kids are starting to steam me.”

“Come on, Ashley,” I pleaded. “We have to go.” I pulled her away. We walked halfway across the plaza. Glancing back, I saw the guard leaning against the glass doors, staring at us.

“Why wouldn’t he help us?” Ashley demanded in a high, angry voice. “Why wouldn’t he even listen to us? Doesn’t he realize what’s going to happen? It—it’s going to be so horrible, James. And we—we’re going to be trapped in it.”

“I know,” I replied softly, glancing up at the strange yellow sky.

I suddenly realized that Paul hadn’t said a word in quite a while. I turned to him and found him staring hard at Ashley and me, a thoughtful look locked on his face.

“Paul—what’s wrong?” I asked.

“What name did you just say?” he asked. “Who did you tell the guard you wanted to find?”

“P. D. Walters,” Ashley told him. “Remember, Paul? The old man with the white hair and beard? His name is P. D. Walters.”

Paul let out a short cry. His mouth dropped open. He stared first at Ashley, then at me. “But that’s *impossible!*” he cried.

“What? What’s impossible?” I demanded.

“*I’m* P. D. Walters!” Paul exclaimed.



Ashley and I both gaped at Paul. Ashley grabbed his arm.

“What do you mean?” she cried shrilly. “What are you saying?”

“I’m P. D. Walters!” Paul insisted. An excited laugh escaped from him. “Paul David Walters! That’s my name!”

“But you—you—” Ashley stammered, still holding on to him. “You mean that all this time —”

“I don’t *believe* it!” I cried, shaking my head. I had to laugh, too. Ashley and I had been such jerks!

We were searching for P.D. as an old man. But we had traveled back *more than sixty years* in time! P.D. was a boy in 1931—not a white-bearded old man!

We had wasted all this time searching for P. D. Walters—when he had been with us the entire night!

“But why are you looking for me? How do you know about me?” P.D. demanded. “I don’t understand this. I don’t understand any of it at all!”

“We don’t either,” I confessed.

“We don’t have time to talk about it,” Ashley said, her eyes raised to the darkening sky. “Just get us back to our time—okay, P.D.?”

“Huh?” His mouth dropped open. “Do *what?*”

“Get us *out* of here,” Ashley repeated impatiently. “Send us back to our time.”

He stared at her for a long time, thinking very hard. “How would I do that?” he replied finally. His features were tight with confusion. “I’m sorry, Ashley. I really don’t know what you mean.”

“But you’re the only one who can help us!” Ashley screamed. I could hear the panic rise in her voice.

I put a hand on her shoulder, trying to calm her a little. Then I turned to P.D., who was shaking his head fretfully. “Can you show us the way to The Beast?” I asked softly.

“The what?” he replied, more confused than ever.

“Maybe if we found The Beast, we could ride it to the future,” I suggested.

“Yes! Good idea!” Ashley cried. “P.D.—hurry! Take us to The Beast!”

“I’m sorry,” P.D. replied sadly. “I really am sorry. But I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never heard of The Beast.”

Ashley let out a long, sad sigh. Her shoulders slumped. “I don’t believe this,” she murmured. “He can’t help us. He can’t help us at all.”

And just then the wind began to roar.



The wind had started as a distant whisper. The whisper was now becoming a steady roar and the trees were beginning to shake. The yellow tint had faded from the sky. The gray quickly darkened to black.

Fire danced in the torches overhead, flickered, then dipped low.

“We’re trapped!” Ashley wailed. “Trapped!”

“I’m sorry,” P.D. cried, hurrying to keep up with her as she made her way through the crowded boardwalk. “I’m really sorry. I’d help you if I knew what to do.”

“Let’s find a safe place to hide,” I suggested, shouting over the roar of the wind. “Maybe there’s a basement somewhere, or someplace that’s protected.”

“But we’ve got to warn people!” Ashley insisted. “We’ve got to try.”

We had wandered back to the carnival area. Up ahead on his small platform, the sideshow barker was still talking into his megaphone, still trying to draw people into his show.

“Ashley, wait!” I cried.

But I was too late. I watched her leap up onto the platform and grab the megaphone out of the startled man’s hands. He cried out in protest and stumbled off the platform, landing hard on the concrete.

“Run, everyone!” Ashley shouted into the megaphone. “It’s a tornado! Run, everyone! Tornado coming!”

I could barely hear her over the rush of the wind.

“Tornado coming!” she shouted. “Leave the park! Tornado!”

The wind swirled around the sideshow building. People were still heading inside.

I saw two teenagers, their shirts flapping in the strong wind, pointing and laughing at Ashley. A middle-aged man and woman were shaking their heads, probably thinking Ashley was pulling some kind of prank.

The wind was funneled down the midway, flapping awnings, making the flimsy buildings tremble. I heard little kids crying, their frightened wails rising over the rush of the wind.

The sky grew even darker. The swirling air felt hot and wet.

“Tornado! Leave the park! *Please*—listen to me!” Ashley was screaming frantically into the megaphone.

I turned and saw the carnival barker. He was holding his straw hat in one hand to keep it from blowing away. He was talking to two guards. Speaking rapidly, angrily, he was pointing at Ashley.

“Uh-oh!” I cried out loud. “Here come the guards!”

P.D. and I ran up to Ashley. We didn’t have to say a word. She saw the guards, too. They were running toward us, their eyes narrowed in anger. The carnival barker hurried after them.

Ashley dropped the megaphone. All three of us began running, running into the wind. It tried to push us back. We lowered our heads and ran harder.

I glanced back. There were *four* guards chasing us now.

“Run!” I screamed. “Keep running!” My words were pushed back in my face by the on-rushing wind.

The wind blew so hard, I couldn’t breathe. The air was filled with dust, swirling and stinging

our faces and lungs.

I closed my eyes and kept running.

When I opened them, I saw we had run up against a tall wooden fence.

“Dead end!” I screamed.

I turned to see the four guards closing in. Their expressions were triumphant when they saw they had us cornered.

I pressed my back against the fence and searched desperately for an escape route. But we were blocked on both sides by big garbage trucks.

The wind howled louder. Louder.

Heads lowered, the guards moved in on us.

We’re trapped, I realized, glancing at Ashley and P.D.

They were pressed against the wooden fence, too. The wind sent Ashley’s hair flying wildly about her head.

“Now what?” Ashley cried.

I could barely hear her over the howling wind. The thick dust forced me to shut my eyes again.

We’re trapped in the tornado, I realized.

The park is about to be destroyed—and so are we.



The guards spread out as they closed in on us. Their angry scowls had turned to eager grins. They knew they had us trapped.

The wind knocked over a large metal trash can and sent it toppling in front of us. I cried out, startled.

Suddenly I felt a tug on my shoulder.

“This way!” P.D. shouted, cupping his hands to be heard over the wind. He started to pull me along the fence.

“Where are we going?” Ashley cried shrilly.

P.D. didn’t reply.

We followed him, huddling together, leaning into the wind.

He stopped suddenly—and pushed hard against two wooden fence planks.

They tilted up, and we ducked under them.

Escape!

“That’s where I sneak into the park!” P.D. cried, grinning. “I knew this fence looked familiar!”

We didn’t have time to thank him. All three of us were running full speed now, away from the fence toward the dark woods.

The trees bent low and shook in the raging wind. As we ran toward them, they appeared to come alive, to jump about and dance.

Would we be safer among the trees?

Probably not.

But we didn’t stop to think about it. All we could think of was getting away from the guards and hiding until the tornado had passed.

Glancing back, I saw the guards pulling themselves through the fence opening one by one. “Run!” I shouted. “They’re coming!”

P.D. slipped and stumbled in the tall grass.

Ashley and I both grabbed him and pulled him to his feet.

We started to run again—then stopped as the enormous shadow loomed over us.

At first I thought it was some kind of gigantic black creature huddled in the trees.

But then my eyes focused on the rising sweep of the tracks as they curved overhead.

“The Beast!”

Ashley and I shouted the words together.

I gaped up at it in disbelief. Had it been standing there the whole time? Could we ride it out of the tornado, out of 1931, back to our time?

I could hear the guards’ angry shouts behind us.

Without turning back, we started to run.

A few seconds later we were plunging up the concrete ramp.

“The cars—they’re here!” Ashley cried breathlessly.

Yes. As if waiting for us, the empty roller coaster cars stood in the darkness.

Were they already moving?

No. The gusts of wind were making the cars vibrate.

Ashley leaped into the first car. “Hurry!” she screamed.

P.D. had made his way to the controls.

“Pull that lever!” I shouted, pointing. “Pull it down! Then jump on!”

As I climbed in after Ashley, I saw P.D. pull the lever down.

With a hard jolt the car jerked forward. “We’re moving!” I cried. The wheels clattered over the track.

“P.D.—hurry!” Ashley screamed.

I twisted back to see why he wasn’t joining us.

“No!” I screamed when I saw the two guards grab P.D. and drag him away from the control lever. “P.D.!”

The car was pulling away.

I saw P.D. struggle to free himself. But the two guards held on tight.

“P.D.! P.D.!” Ashley was shouting his name over and over.

He called to us, his voice frightened, desperate.

But he couldn’t get away.

Then, just as our car started to pick up speed, I saw two dark figures dive into our car.

The other two guards.

They had leaped into the seat right behind us.



I was pressed back against the seat as the car started to climb.
The winds whistled around us, faster, louder.
We're climbing right into the tornado! I thought.
We'll never get out. Never!
The winds will blow us off the track.
And even if we do ride to the end, I realized, the guards are right with us. We haven't escaped at all.
Up, up. The tracks stretched steeper into the raging wind.
And then Ashley and I were both screaming as we plunged straight down.
Down into more wind and darting shadows.
An angry, shrill howl, the howl of the tornado, drowned out our screams.
The car swooped and slid through the wind, through the hot dust, so thick it clogged our throats, through the ceaseless howl.
And then up again. Another steep climb.
And another plunge.
Down into fog. Cooling fog. So wet, so soft against my face.
Had the wind actually stopped howling?
Had we left the tornado behind?
The heavy fog swept over us as we shot forward.
We're riding through clouds, I thought. Soft, cool clouds.
A sharp swerve. Another jarring dip.
I gripped the safety bar, bouncing hard in the seat.
The fog was so heavy, the shadows so thick, I couldn't tell if my eyes were open or shut.
And then suddenly we stopped.
The ride ended in a splash of pale silver moonlight.
I glanced at Ashley. Her face was paler than the light.
We were both breathing hard, still gripping the safety bar.
Finally I managed to pull myself to my feet. I stood and, holding the seat back, stepped out onto the platform.
My legs still rubbery, I helped Ashley out.
The wind had calmed. The moonlight glittered down on us, soft and silvery.
The two guards!
I had nearly forgotten about them.
They had taken the ride with us. They had soared through the darkness, out of the winds, through the shifting, sweeping fog.
We hadn't escaped.
I turned to their seat and prepared to be captured.
"Oh, no!" Ashley screamed shrilly as she saw them.
My mouth dropped open, but no sound came out.
Two gray skeletons sat in the seat behind us, tiny scraps of blue clothing clinging to their bones.



The moonlight shone down on the gray-green bones, the black, empty eye sockets, the grinning skulls.

“James—what h-happened?” Ashley stammered, gaping in horror at what remained of the two guards.

“I think we’ve traveled through time,” I told her, unable to take my eyes off the skeletons. “I think we’ve come back more than sixty years to our own time.”

“And the guards?”

“I think they died of old age,” I said.

And as I said it, the bones began to crumble.

The patches of blue cloth—what had once been their uniforms—fluttered and floated away in the breeze.

The bones crumbled to gray powder. The powder was carried off by the wind.

“P.D. sent us back in time to 1931,” I said, watching the powder float away in the moonlight. “I guess he hoped we could warn people about the tornado and save lives.”

“But of course we couldn’t,” Ashley said sadly. “You can’t change history, right? You can’t change the past.”

“We proved that,” I replied thoughtfully. “We didn’t change anything at all.”

“Are we really back home?” Ashley asked.

I opened my mouth to answer, but a stern voice interrupted.

“How did you kids get back here? What are you doing here?”

Bright flashlights played over our faces, forcing us to cover our eyes.

The Kings Island security guards had finally caught us.



They guided us to the front office and called my mom.

We explained that we had accidentally gotten locked in the park after it closed.

“You should have come right to the security office instead of running around having adventures,” a guard scolded, shaking his head.

Ashley and I apologized.

“Can we just go and say good-bye to P.D.?” Ashley asked.

The guard narrowed his eyes at her. “Who?”

“P. D. Walters,” Ashley replied. “You know. The old man who tests The Beast at night.”

The guards exchanged glances. “Are you feeling okay?” one of them asked her.

“There is no old man who tests The Beast,” the other one said, frowning.

We all stared at one another in silence.

Then I asked if Ashley and I could wait for my mom outside.

The guards eyed us suspiciously. “You’re not going to run away again?”

“No. Promise,” I said.

“Wait by that gate,” the guard said, pointing out the window.

Ashley and I wandered outside. The park was dark and silent. Pale moonlight washed over us as we made our way to the front gate.

“The next time they won’t catch us,” Ashley murmured, grinning.

“Huh? *Next* time?” I cried.

I started to tell her there wouldn’t *be* any next time—but something caught my eye.

It was a large brass plaque mounted on the wall beside the gate. The plaque caught the moonlight and glowed brightly against the dark wall.

Ashley saw it, too. We both moved close to read it:

FIRELIGHT PARK
HONOR ROLL
THIS PLAQUE IS IN MEMORIAM
OF THOSE WHO PERISHED
JUNE 15, 1931

My eyes drifted down the long list of names engraved on the metal plaque.

Ashley and I read aloud the very last name at the bottom of the list: “P. D. Walters.”

“He didn’t get out,” Ashley murmured sadly. “He died in the tornado.”

“But then, how—”

I never finished my question.

Through the gate I saw car headlights rolling across the vast parking lot. My mom. Coming to pick us up.

Then behind us I heard a faint sound. A familiar sound, floating on the night air.

I glanced at Ashley. She heard it, too.

We both listened in silence to the sound drifting from the back of the park.

Was it the clatter of roller coaster wheels?

Or was it just the wind?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“Where do you get your ideas?”

That’s the question that R. L. Stine is asked most often. “I don’t know where my ideas come from,” he says. “But I do know that I have a lot more scary stories in my mind that I can’t wait to write.”

So far, he has written nearly three dozen mysteries and thrillers for young people, all of them best-sellers.

Bob grew up in Columbus, Ohio. Today he lives in an apartment near Central Park in New York City with his wife, Jane, and fourteen-year-old son, Matt.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



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About the Author



The car clattered to a stop on the wooden tracks. I let my breath out in a long, satisfied *whoosh*.

Then I turned to my cousin, Ashley Franks. “What did I tell you?” I croaked.

My throat was raw from screaming and laughing nonstop for the last four minutes.

Grinning, she unglued her hands from the safety bar. “You’re right, James. That was superb!” she exclaimed.

Ashley and I hadn’t been to Paramount’s Kings Island together in almost a year. We were making up for it fast. Already we had ridden The Beast three times.

This last time we did something a little different. We closed our eyes going down the steepest hill.

It sounds easy, but it isn’t. With your eyes squeezed shut while the car pitches straight down the tracks, it feels as if the world has dropped out from under you. And you’re falling through the air. Just falling.

I grinned and pointed to Ashley’s hair. It was standing up around her head. Sort of like a cartoon character that’s free-falling off a cliff.

Laughing, she reached up to smooth it down. The Beast did that. Snarled your hair. Scrambled your insides, too.

It’s the longest, scariest wooden coaster there is.

We climbed out of the car. My legs felt rubbery on the concrete platform. Everybody was talking about how great the ride was as they staggered dizzily toward the exit ramp.

As I weaved along, Ashley darted in front of me.

“Let’s do it again, James.” Her eyes sparkled mischievously as she danced along backward in front of me.

I turned on the ramp to stare up at the enormous roller coaster. It loomed big and black against the purple night sky.

Floodlights beamed down from the massive wooden scaffolding. They outlined the swirling, swooping, diving, soaring shape of The Beast.

I shivered.

People said that a ghost haunted The Beast at night.

Of course, people only make up that story to scare themselves. People love to scare themselves.

But deep down, they didn’t really believe there was a ghost. It was just a story, right?

Well, my cousin and I knew differently.

Not that you could tell from the way Ashley was bubbling over tonight. She was all eager and excited to get back on The Beast.

I guess you could say that Ashley is the adventurous type—at least until she gets

caught up in a for-real adventure. Then she sometimes wimps out.

Me, on the other hand, I don't exactly invite adventure. But when it comes my way, I'm pretty excited by it.

"It's getting late. . . ." I told her.

"Come on, James." She slapped me on the back.

I winced. "I'm tired," I complained.

I glanced at my watch. "Almost time for the park to close."

"Come on, James," she wheedled me. "One more time won't hurt. What's the matter? Full moon got you scared?"

I shrugged and looked up. The big orange moon was not quite full.

I heaved a sigh. "Okay, one more time." I held up a single finger.

"Yes!" Ashley exploded and started dancing me around in a circle.

"But first," I added, removing myself from her clutches, "I've got to go to the snack bar. I need an energy boost, big-time."

Ashley punched me on the arm. "Go for it."

She spun me around and shoved me in the direction of the snack bar. "Go reenergize. But hurry. I think they're starting to load the cars."

Ashley trotted over to the end of the line, her shiny pink clogs clip-clopping.

I hurried to the snack bar. Luckily, there was only one kid ahead of me in line. Unluckily, he was moving in slow motion.

Staring at the green Day-Glo brontosaurus on the back of his T-shirt, I tried to burn two holes in his back so he'd hurry up. I mean, how long could it take to pick out a snack?

I glanced back. The line feeding into The Beast was beginning to move.

Ashley stamped her clogs and waved at me. I read her lips.

Hurry up!

I shrugged helplessly. I wasn't about to brave The Beast again without my Karamel Kreemies.

Karamel Kreemies is my favorite candy this summer. Last summer I liked Marshmallow Bombs. But for some reason, the company stopped making them.

So I've switched to Karamel Kreemies in a big way. Just as the commercial says, "if I don't get my Kreemies, I get the screamies."

Bronto-boy ahead of me was trying to decide between the Mango Mango Munchies and the Frootie-Toot-Toots. Personally, I like the Mango Mango Munchies better. The flavor lasts twice as long.

Two girls got in line behind me. One was tall with a long brown braid. The other was short with punkish red hair. They were a little older than me and wore red checked shorts and identical short white T-shirts. Their socks and sneakers matched, too.

Why is it that girlfriends sometimes think it's so cool to dress exactly alike? Do they think people will mistake them for twins? These two couldn't even pass for distant cousins.

"Come on, Tiffany, I bet it's not that scary," the short one was telling her friend.

"Bet it is," Tiffany insisted.

Tiffany turned to size up The Beast. From where we stood, it was almost

completely hidden by thick, dark woods.

You could hear it, though—the rattle of the wheels on the wooden tracks, the high-pitched squeals of the people in the cars. The screams rose and fell at the same time, like one great big shrill scream.

An amazing sound.

I guess that's why some people like to call it a scream machine.

The short one jerked her chin at me. "Why don't you ask him, Tiff. He just got off The Beast."

"Really?" Tiffany turned to stare at me as if I'd just returned from a trip to the moon.

I nodded modestly.

"Is it as scary as everybody says?" Tiffany asked eagerly.

I pretended to think about it. "Yeah. It's terrifying," I informed her.

Tiffany's eyes grew wider still, and she nudged her friend. "What did I tell you? No way are you getting me on that monster."

I sighed and smiled sadly. "Why come here if you don't want to be terrified? It's fun!"

I turned away from Tiffany and her friend to find that Slo-mo Day-Glo bronto-boy was still at it. Ashley was now signaling to me with frantic little jumping jacks as the line inched closer to the gate.

I finally tapped the kid on the shoulder. "Go for the Mango Mango Munchies," I told him. I *really* had the screamies now.

The kid turned, gnawing his lip uncertainly. His cheeks were sticky and pink from cotton candy.

"You really think so?" he asked.

"Trust me," I insisted.

I guess the kid knew an expert when he heard one, because he put down the Frootie-Toot-Toots and paid for the Munchies. Plus five other pieces of candy.

And I thought *I* had it bad.

I scanned the rows of candy for the familiar screaming pink-and-purple roll. The jingle from the TV ad ran through my head: "*Karamel Kreemie, smooth and dreamie!*"

"Got them!" I grabbed the roll and almost threw the money at the lady behind the counter.

I tore back just in time to catch the tail end of the line being swallowed up by the gates.

I hurried up the ramp and onto the platform, scanning the cars for my cousin.

When I saw her, I stopped short and gasped.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing.



My cousin Ashley was sitting in the very first seat of the very first car.

She was grinning, looking extremely pleased with herself.

Everybody wanted to sit in those seats.

I mean, they were absolutely the best. Sitting in those seats, you could feel every twist and turn, every climb and swoop, ultra-magnified. Nothing stood between you and the terror.

And yet, my cousin had been practically the last in line. How had she managed to get the very best seats on the ride?

“Smooth move,” I congratulated her.

Her blue eyes twinkled. “The kids who were sitting here before chickened out at the last minute,” she explained. She patted the seat next to her.

I nodded, impressed.

“Especially,” she added smugly, “after I told them that the first car is haunted.”

A creepy feeling made me shiver.

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” she asked.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I jumped in just before the safety bar slammed down.

“What took you so long?” she demanded as I got settled. “I was afraid you wouldn’t make it.”

“It’s a bnfnnf nnnnewry.”

She leaned in toward me. “What?” she asked.

I guess I wasn’t speaking very clearly. My teeth were glued together with gooey caramel. I swallowed.

“It’s a long story,” I repeated, then popped a second Kreemie in my mouth and chewed.

The incredibly sticky sweetness filled my mouth and slid down my throat like syrup.

Sugar heaven.

Smooth and dreamie.

But I was being rude.

“Want one?” I held out the roll to my cousin.

She shook her head and flashed me a mouth full of braces. They were the new kind that came in bright colors rather than just plain metal. Hers were pink and purple.

It was sort of unfair. I mean, I couldn’t even call her tinsel-teeth.

“I keep forgetting you have braces now,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes. “How could anyone forget? I certainly can’t. I can’t eat candy or apples or corn on the cob or any of my favorite foods. I hate them.”

Ashley is not too happy about the braces. Even though they’re the new, cool kind, I think they embarrass her. She tries not to smile or laugh as much as she

used to, but she pretty much can't help herself. She happens to be the laughing, smiling type.

I tell her she looks okay, braces and all, even though she doesn't believe me.

My cousin and I don't look at all alike. She's blond, blue-eyed, freckled, and peppy. I'm dark, brown-eyed and serious. At least that's how I come across.

Deep down, I think I've got a pretty good sense of humor. And I don't have braces. Or a single cavity in my head.

My mother says it's a minor miracle, considering how much candy I eat. I guess I'm just lucky.

I popped one more Karamel Kreemie into my mouth while I still had a chance and jammed the roll into the pocket of my jean shorts.

I felt a gentle tug as the car started to move forward.

"Here we go!" I heard the redheaded girl in the car behind us tell her boyfriend. The boyfriend sort of whimpered.

Ashley and I exchanged grins as the car began to pick up speed. Our heads thudded back against the headrests as we began to climb the first and steepest of the three hills. Higher and higher we crawled up the creaky wooden platform.

I took my eyes from the track long enough to shoot a glance at Ashley. She was staring wide-eyed at the top of the hill. It seemed to drop off into space. The car slowed to a standstill.

We teetered at the tip-top for a heart-stopping instant.

Far, far below us the dark treetops danced. As the cool wind whipped our hair and clothes, I felt a sudden surge of happiness. Then we swooped straight down.

"Whoop!"

Down, down the car clattered.

My cousin flung up her arms, opened her mouth wide, and shrieked.

Down, down we dipped into the whirling, churning sea of trees.

We were hurtling through a jumble of lights and shadows and terrified screams.

I gripped the bar, arms stiff, screaming my head off.

Each time I ride The Beast, I tell myself this time I'll get through the ride without screaming.

Then I realize, halfway down the first hill, that screaming is what it's all about. And I open my mouth and out it comes. It feels great.

We whirled into an underground tunnel, the blackness billowing around us, swallowing us totally.

"Whoooooaaaaa!" I heard Ashley cry.

Just as suddenly, we broke out of the tunnel, and zoomed around a sharp bend. Ashley grabbed my arm.

"Oomph!"

Her long blond hair streamed into my eyes, blinding me. I reached up to brush it away just as we zipped the other way.

She was laughing, shouting something about "*my favorite part, James!*"

Before I could reply, we tipped backward with a bump and started climbing another hill.

Then down we roared, stomachs churning, into the deep, dark valley. The wind

pounded my cheeks and stung my eyes.

Bright lights rippled over me.

The car jolted level, whipping us into a tunnel so dark, I didn't know where I stopped and it began. It was like hurtling through deep space.

Out of the tunnel, we exploded in a burst of blinding bright light.

I panted, gasping for breath as the car scaled a hill, up and up toward that big orange moon. Then down again, tossed topsy-turvy through a tunnel.

And then we slowed.

My face felt chapped, almost wind-burned. Every tooth in my head tingled.

The car clattered to a stop on the wooden tracks.

I sat completely still with my eyes closed.

You know the way you feel after a day of swimming in the ocean surf? You lie in bed and you can still feel the waves tossing you every which way?

Well, there's a moment, right after the ride ends when, if you just sit there, with your eyes closed, you can relive every twist and turn, every climb and drop of the three-minute-and-forty-second ride.

I opened my eyes and exhaled.

"Great idea, Ashley. I'm glad you suggested it!" I exclaimed as I turned to my cousin.

I couldn't believe it.

This couldn't be happening.

Not again!

I shook my head and blinked. But it didn't change a thing.

The seat beside me where my cousin Ashley had been sitting seconds ago was empty.

Ashley was gone!



My heart was hammering in my chest.

Where was Ashley?

I put my hand over my heart to try and slow it. I needed to be calm. I needed to think clearly. I took deep breaths. Slower, slower.

I remembered Ashley beside me. I remembered her flinging her arms up going down that first hill.

I remembered her hair flying in my face.

And her screaming. My right ear was practically deaf from the sound of her shrill, sharp screaming.

Was there a point when her screaming stopped?

Had she had fallen out as we hurtled through one of the tunnels?

Impossible.

She couldn't fall out of the car with the safety bar down.

I felt the seat. It was still warm from her body. Could she have slipped out quickly just as the ride ended, before I opened my eyes?

If she was playing one of her cute tricks on me, I was going to kill her.

Well, maybe not kill her exactly. But seriously pound her, for sure.

I lifted the safety bar and climbed out of the car. I elbowed my way through the crowd up to the man in the blue uniform.

"Did you see a girl with blond hair and white shorts get off the ride?" I asked. My voice came out sounding pip-squeaky.

"Son," he replied sadly, "do you have any idea how many blond girls in white shorts I see here every day?"

I didn't think he expected an answer to that question, so I didn't give him one.

"She might have gotten off the ride early," I suggested hopefully. "Before it slowed down?"

He shook his head. "Not while I'm on duty! The safety bar is locked until the car comes to a complete halt."

I glanced back into the cars, measuring with my eyes the distance between the bar and the seat.

"My cousin is pretty skinny," I explained. "She might have slipped out, even with the bar down."

"Impossible," the man said flatly. "Check down by the exit gate, why don't you?"

I nodded gloomily.

"Or check at the message center," he continued, pointing out over the heads of the exiting crowd. "Better make it snappy, though. The park's closing soon."

My eyes followed the direction of his finger to the tall replica of the Eiffel Tower that stands at the center of the park.

I nodded numbly and staggered down the ramp.

Ashley wasn't at the exit gate. She wasn't standing anywhere near it.

Might as well head for the message center near the tower.

But why was I even bothering?

There was no way she could have gotten off the ride and gone over to the message center in time to leave me a message. I mean, why would she do a thing like that?

Besides, what sort of message would it be, anyway?

Dear James, I've disappeared into thin air. Just try and find me. Your Cousin Ashley.

My anger started boiling up again. My face felt hot. My hands were clenched in the pockets of my denim shorts.

I made my way past the Vortex. The Vortex is a giant steel roller coaster that turns you upside down and every which way. We'd ridden it before lunch, while our stomachs were still pretty empty.

Ever since we first saw it, Ashley and I have wondered what it would be like to sneak underneath the Vortex and collect all the loose change that must fly out of people's pockets when the coaster spins them upside down.

Maybe Ashley was underneath the Vortex right now, grubbing around on her hands and knees for loose change.

Maybe not.

I passed the old-time fifties café where they serve burgers and shakes. A woman was pulling down the shutter.

I trotted over to the café, where a man was sponging off tables.

"Did a girl with long blond hair and pink clogs happen to grab a quick burger just now?" I asked breathlessly. "She likes her burgers plain. No ketchup or anything."

The man with the sponge straightened up. "Kitchen is closed for the night. She didn't stop here," he said.

I continued on. People streamed past me, tired and happy, heading for the parking lot. I searched among them for Ashley, my chest tightening by the second.

The park was about to close. And my cousin was nowhere in sight.

What was I supposed to do? Leave without her?

I passed the basketball game booth, its lights out, its hoops still and empty.

Only this afternoon Ashley had bet me five dollars I couldn't sink eight free throws in a row. Ashley lost.

I reached into my pocket and felt the wilted five-dollar bill I had won from her.

"Ashley!" I yelled, turning in a tight circle and scanning the crowd. "I'll give you back your five dollars if you show your face . . . right now!"

A few strangers flashed me funny looks. But no Ashley popped up among them to claim her five dollars.

I jogged along, checking to the left and right, scanning the darkened game booths, souvenir stands, and snack bars. Was she hiding in the shadows, peering out at me? Was she having a good laugh?

How could she put me through this? Did she actually think it was funny?

It wasn't funny.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a woman’s voice crackled over the loudspeaker system, “Paramount’s Kings Island is now closing. Please make your way to the exits and have a nice night.”

I was most definitely *not* having a nice night.

I felt myself being pushed along with the crowd as it streamed toward the Eiffel Tower, and the gates beyond. Then I froze and let the crowd flow around me.

I turned slowly and looked back in the direction of The Beast.

Maybe I was going the wrong way.

Maybe she had never really left The Beast.

Maybe if I went back right now, I would find her.

Ashley would be waiting for me on the darkened platform, hugging herself, her big blue eyes wide and scared.

Then again, maybe she was waiting for me at the gate, arms crossed, tapping her foot, angry because *I* had wandered off.

I stood on the path and looked one way, then the other.

I didn’t know which way to go, backward or forward.

I didn’t know whether to be angry or scared.

One thing I did know.

I wasn’t leaving this park tonight. No way.

Not without my cousin.



I had to stay in the park after the gates were closed and locked. Where could I hide? At closing time the place was crawling with security guards in blue suits.

I whipped around and raced back along International Street, past the still fountains, back into the heart of the park.

The air had grown damp and the orange moon was now shrouded in a thick, green mist.

I felt cold. Maybe it was the sudden darkness. The emptiness. The quiet.

Only minutes ago the park had been brightly lit and crowded. The fountains had been gushing, and cheerful music had blared over the loudspeakers.

Now the lights were dim. The fountains were turned off. The loudspeakers silent. As I jogged along, the tiny lights in the soles of my sneakers blinked, first one, then the other, like a signal.

An SOS signal.

But there was no one here to help me. If I told one of the guards, he'd make me go to the office.

The restaurants, the stores, the booths—everything was closed and padlocked and dark. The only sound I heard was the breeze riffling the treetops.

I stopped and stared down into a reflecting pool. It shimmered like black glass. My face stared up at me, pinched and worried.

I couldn't believe this was happening. A sick, panicky feeling squeezed my throat.

My head jerked up at a sudden noise.

Someone was coming from the direction of the games alley. I ran and ducked behind a wastebasket next to a lemonade stand.

The wastebasket smelled like lemons. My nose twitched.

Two security guards strolled past, the beams of their flashlights sweeping the path. They paused in front of the stand.

My stomach flip-flopped. My nose twitched again. I felt a sneeze tickling at the back of my throat. Don't tell me I had developed a sudden allergy to lemons!

They played their flashlight beams across the bushes behind me and came to rest on the wastebasket. I curled myself into a tiny ball and pinched my nose to stifle a sneeze.

"Wish I'd bet on that game," one of them said to the other. "I'd be a rich man today."

"You and me both," the other replied. "I could use a glass of lemonade right about now."

"A cup of hot tea would be more like it," his partner replied. "I think we're in for some rain tonight."

The flashlight beam swept away from me as the guards resumed their patrol.

I let out my breath in a *whoosh* of relief. I sneezed quickly three times.

I felt awful.

I couldn't believe I was hiding from the guards again. I couldn't believe any of this was happening again.

But it was.

Last summer Ashley and I were locked in the park after it closed. On a dare I went along with my cousin's crazy plan to spend the night in the park.

At the foot of The Beast we had met an old bearded man in overalls who tested the cars at night. His name was P. D. Walters.

P.D. had told us all about Firelight Park, the amusement park that had once stood on the same spot as Paramount's Kings Island. Sixty years ago it had been destroyed by a tornado. Hundreds of people were killed. It was a tragic story.

Then P.D. offered to let us have a ride on The Beast through the swirling nighttime fog.

The ride had been awesome.

There had been only one problem.

We traveled into the past.

Sixty years into the past.

To Firelight Park.

We met a boy named Paul. He was showing us a great time until a newspaper blew by. The date on the newspaper was the day the tornado was due to hit.

Nobody believed us when we tried to warn them. It was only as the tornado was practically on top of us that we made an amazing discovery. Our young friend Paul and P. D. Walters, were the exact same people, from two different times.

Luckily for us, we found The Beast and jumped on just in time. We escaped the tornado and went tearing back to the present.

But we had failed to get Paul to come along with us.

I'll never forget.

As we were leaving the park that night, we spied Paul's name, among many others, engraved on a memorial plaque near the front gate.

Then we knew two things.

Our friend Paul had not survived the tornado.

And P.D., the old man in the overalls, wasn't really a special nighttime worker of the amusement park.

P.D. was a ghost. The ghost of young Paul, who died in flames so many years ago.

The stories people told were true.

The Beast really was haunted.

I could barely stand to think about it. But I had a terrible feeling Ashley wasn't just lost somewhere in the park.

Ashley was lost in time!



I knelt there behind the trash can, hugging myself to keep warm. A fine rain had begun to sift down from the low mist hanging overhead.

Just my luck. And me without so much as a windbreaker to keep me dry.

I pulled up the damp collar of my maroon-and-white striped soccer jersey.

I've wondered a lot about time travel since that night last summer.

Did The Beast itself send us roaring backward into the past? Or did P.D. flick the switches that sent us back?

In the last year I've read every book on the subject of time travel I could get my hands on.

Some of them are hard to understand. Most are pretty fascinating.

I've read H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. Plus dozens of fantasy and science fiction stories.

I've also rented every movie about time travel ever made.

What I've learned is that there are lots of different ways to travel through time. All kinds of time machines and ways to send yourself back and forth.

And somehow last summer when we were riding The Beast, we were sucked back sixty years in time to Firelight Park. I don't know how or why. It just happened.

Now, huddling in the rain, an idea flashed into my mind. I pushed the wet hair off my forehead and rose to my feet.

Last summer The Beast had carried us both back in time.

This time, for some reason, Ashley had been pulled back alone.

I imagined her, all by herself, stuck in some other time, her blue eyes filling with tears. She'd be a mess without me.

She might even be in trouble.

I had to help her. But I couldn't do it alone. I needed a helper.

I had to get back to The Beast.

Maybe P.D. was standing there on the platform, waiting for me.

Maybe the old ghost could help me rescue Ashley from the past.

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I nearly didn't duck down in time to hide from the guards on their return trip.

I hit the ground seconds before they passed.

Close call.

One of them stepped off the path.

He was marching straight toward the wastebasket.

Straight toward me.

The beam of his flashlight shone into my face.

"Well, lookee here what I found!" he called out to his partner.



The guard dived toward me.

I knew I should run while I still had the chance, but my sneakers felt rooted to the spot.

Besides, my right foot had fallen fast asleep. I'd have to drag it after me, like a sack of potatoes.

Maybe my brain was asleep, too, because I didn't even have a good story ready to blurt out to him.

I wasn't even sure I'd be able to talk. My tongue felt as if it had swollen to the size of knockwurst!

The guard bent down. His tall shadow fell across me.

I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting for him to grab me by my shoulders and yank me to my feet.

But nothing happened.

I opened my eyes, one at a time.

The guard had straightened up again.

He was staring down into his hand.

"Well, lookee what I found," he called out to his buddy. "It's a genuine silver dollar."

I practically fainted in relief as he ran over to show his partner.

"What do you know! It's a nineteen twenty-eight!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know there were any of these around anymore."

"You might be a rich man yet!" His partner chuckled as the two of them strolled off.

It was drizzling harder now. My shirt and pants were sopping, and my sneaker soles were coated with mud.

I waited until the guards were out of earshot. Then I rose slowly, stamping my foot to work out the pins and needles.

Then I made a beeline for The Beast.

The park felt eerie. The buildings and rides hunched behind a thin curtain of falling rain.

I kept to the grassy alley behind the buildings. I didn't want to run into any more guards. My sneakers squeaked as I made my way across the wet grass.

Running wasn't easy. My breath came out in painful little puffs. I had that heavy feeling again, as if I had a rock weighing me down.

I had a bad feeling about Ashley. I had the feeling that she needed me.

I had to get to her. I had to help her before something really terrible happened.

I wasn't doing so great myself. I was wet all the way through to my underwear, and I was shivering from the cold.

Then I heard something.

I pulled up short and held my breath, listening.

I heard the splatter of raindrops, sifting down like fine sand on the rooftops of the buildings and on the leaves of the small trees.

But I heard something else, too.

The ghostly clatter of wheels over wooden tracks.

I'd know that sound anywhere.

The rattle of the coaster wheels, the hollow sound of the empty cars rolling over the creaking wooden tracks.

The Beast!

I dashed up the ramp and skidded to a stop on the platform.

Then I saw him. He stood with his hands on the control levers, his head lowered.

He wore the same big, old-fashioned-looking overalls over a black, long-sleeved sweater.

I shivered as a sudden damp gust of wind swept across the platform. It lifted his white hair up around his head like a loose, silvery hood.

My heart was pounding. I cleared my throat nervously.

He didn't glance up from the controls.

I guess he hadn't noticed me yet. I wasn't sure I even wanted him to notice me.

There was still time to turn around and run.

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. But I stood my ground.

Sure, I had come back here to find P.D. because somehow I knew that he was my only hope.

But that didn't mean I had the nerve to approach him.

I found myself wishing Ashley were here.

She would have just bopped up to him and said, "Hey, P.D., how's it going?"

I wasn't feeling very bold. I was cold and wet and exhausted, and scared out of my mind.

But I swallowed hard and opened my mouth to speak to the ghost.



“H-Hi,” I squeaked out feebly.

P.D. raised his eyes from the control panel and stared at me. His eyes were dark and sunk deep in his pale face. His lips remained in a straight, grim line.

Over the sound of the rain pelting the platform roof, I could hear the coaster cars as they clattered somewhere above us.

Still he didn't say anything.

This year my hair was shorter on the sides but longer in the back. And I'd grown three-and-a-quarter inches.

Was it possible he didn't recognize me?

I pushed the damp hair off my forehead and stammered, “Don't you remember me?”

“Of course I remember you, James,” his voice boomed back at me. It seemed to stir up the mist that swirled across the platform like wisps of smoke from a cauldron.

“Great!” I broke into a relieved grin and moved a few steps closer to him.

The moisture in the air had beaded on the white hairs of his beard and mustache. It looked like hundreds of tiny diamonds, sparkling in the darkness.

He began to speak, his voice a low rumble in the smoky mist. “I'll never forget that night in Firelight Park. You and your cousin Ashley really showed me a good time.” His lips curled into a smile. “I have very warm memories of that night.”

He patted his belly. “I must have eaten half a dozen Coney Island Dogs. You were flush that night.”

“Flush?” I asked.

“Rich!” He threw back his head and laughed, the sound bouncing off the platform roof.

It wasn't that I was rich. It was just that a little bit of modern money went a long way back then. I mean, a hot dog cost only three cents.

P.D. went on, “You had more money than any kid I had ever met. Then again, most kids I knew were as dirt poor as I was. Still, it was the best night I'd ever spent in Firelight Park.”

His face clouded over. “The last one, too,” he said sadly.

I nodded without saying anything.

What could I say? *I'm real sorry you died?*

“It's good to see you again, James. But why are you here?” he asked.

And then it all came spilling out of me. How I had opened my eyes after the ride was over and Ashley was gone.

“That's why I came back here,” I explained, “to get your help.”

He stroked his long white beard in silence. When he spoke at last, his voice was a ghostly whisper. “I still don't understand, James. How is it that you think I can

help you?”

“You’re my only hope, P.D.,” I pleaded. “I think you’re the key—”

I broke off as two security guards came up behind me through the mist. “What are you doing here?” one of them demanded.

“I’m talking to P.D.,” I explained, gesturing toward the control booth.

The two guards stared into the fog swirling across the platform.

“Talking to *who*?” the guard demanded.

I turned over to the control panel. Only a misty swirl remained where P.D. had stood moments ago.

The ghost had vanished.

But the guards were definitely there.

And they had me.

I was trapped.



One on either side of me, the guards firmly guided me down the ramp, away from The Beast.

I threw a helpless look over my shoulder.

“Don’t you know the park is closed, son?” one asked.

“This is trespassing,” the other added. “You’re breaking the law.”

“We’ll have to call your mom and dad,” the other guard said. “They won’t be too pleased.”

I let them practically carry me through the park, past the silent rides, the darkened booths.

I don’t think I could have walked on my own even if they’d let me. My legs felt limp and lifeless.

I hung my head.

Ashley was really in trouble now.

How could I get Ashley back if they were going to make me leave the park?

And what was I supposed to tell my parents when they came to get me?

What was I supposed to tell Ashley’s parents?

I was in serious trouble. And Ashley wouldn’t even be there to help me.

Ashley always came up with great explanations to keep us out of trouble. She handles grown-ups like a real pro. Parents love her, especially mine. In fact, they hardly ever get mad at me when she is visiting.

But they’d get mad at me now, that was for sure.

The dim lights glistened in the rain puddles as they marched me down International Street toward the main gate.

They’d be taking me to their cold, brightly lit security office. They’d phone my parents. There would be all sorts of questions.

I felt tears sting my eyes. Maybe I’d never see my cousin again.

The rain fell harder. The fog seemed to thicken near the ground, swirling and bubbling around our feet.

Then it shot up like a geyser in front of us, towering over our heads.

I gasped in surprise as the fog slowly took on the shape of a face. I stared at two huge hollow eyes and a long flaming beard. The face began to swarm with millions of insects, feasting on its flesh.

A smell like rotted flesh filled the air. The eyes widened, boring into me. Then the disgusting insects poured out of the eye sockets, spilling over onto the pavement at our feet.

The gruesome skull opened its mouth wide and let out a bellowing howl.



Horrified, the guards let go of me and staggered back.

I didn't think. I just ran.

I ran into the thick, swirling fog. Then I dived into the bushes and hid.

I heard footsteps splattering on the pavement. Other men came running to the rescue. Doors squeaked open and slammed shut. Flashlight arcs crisscrossed the gloomy wetness.

I heard a babble of conversation from the guards.

"I tell you, it was some kind of a weird monster."

"A giant zombie or something! You shoulda seen the size of it!"

"You're crazy!"

"No! We're not makin' this up."

"Yeah, sure. You two guys watch too many horror movies."

"I know what I saw!"

"Then what did you see?"

"I don't know! But I'll be seeing it in my dreams!"

"Hey, where's the kid?"

"The kid? He was here just a minute ago."

"He must have slipped away."

Then more footsteps. More scrambling and shouting. Flashlights cutting through the rain.

I huddled in the bushes, shivering, hoping they wouldn't find me.

I bent down to tie one sopping shoelace—when I felt someone tap me on the shoulder.

My heart stopped beating.

Oh, no!

I spun around to see P.D. He grinned like a small boy. "Pretty good show, eh?" he whispered.

I sagged in relief. "That was you back there? You scared me to death!"

"Thank you." He snickered. "I'm glad to see I still have it in me. I haven't haunted anyone for years. That was fun."

He rose beside me and reached a hand down to pull me up. He was so strong. It was as if I had flown to my feet.

"Come on," he said. "We haven't got much time."

"Does this mean you can help me?" I asked hopefully.

"It means I'm going to try," he replied. "There have been some strange events lately."

"Strange?" I echoed.

He nodded, stroking his long white beard. "Objects from the past that have strayed into the present."

“What kind of objects?” I wanted to know.

“A lady’s umbrella. Some loose change. Random odds and ends from the old days . . . ” he trailed off. “We must get back to The Beast. The Beast is our only hope.”

I followed his ghostly form through the rain. It was hard going. I had to dodge puddles and guards. Both seemed to be everywhere.

It was hard keeping up with P.D.’s long, stalking stride. My soaked sneakers slipped and slid through the mud as I scrambled after him.

Sometimes his body seemed to blend into the rain and mist. A few times I nearly lost him.

But at least I knew where we were going. We were going back to The Beast.

Finally I staggered up the ramp and onto the platform.

P.D. was already there, standing at the controls. He brought the train of cars rattling swiftly around to the loading station. “Hurry,” he urged me, “before they find you. Get in the coaster.”

My glance flickered over the rows of shiny wet seats. Where should I sit?

Reading my mind, P.D. knew the answer. “Take Ashley’s seat,” he instructed me. “Might as well sit in the exact spot she disappeared from.”

I nodded and ran to the head of the coaster. I jumped into Ashley’s seat and brought the safety bar down with a crash.

The Beast began to roll.

It felt creepy, sitting here in the rain, all by myself at the head of a train full of empty cars. The coaster clattered up the slick, dark tracks.

A thought flashed through my mind: *The park closes The Beast when it rains this hard.*

Too late to worry about that now.

Besides, I was way beyond worry. Halfway to terrified.

My heart was pounding painfully. I gripped the cold slippery bar so hard my hands hurt. Higher and higher into the rainy darkness I climbed.

I couldn’t see anything. Only a swirling darkness.

Suddenly the car whipped forward and picked up speed. Faster and faster, roaring up the tracks.

I found myself bracing for the moment when I would reach the peak of that first hill and plunge down.

Then I thought, *Shouldn’t we have reached the peak by now?*

But that moment didn’t come. And didn’t come. And each moment it didn’t come, the terror inside me grew.

Faster and faster and higher and higher, like a missile shooting blindly into the darkness.

The wind whistled past me. My shoulders were stiff and aching. My ears popped painfully.

Then I opened my mouth and screamed as the wheels ripped loose from the track—and the car rocketed into the sky.



I shut my eyes. I waited for the crash.

Waited.

The car came to a gentle stop.

I opened my eyes to total darkness.

“Hey—!” My voice came out choked and tiny. “Where am I?”

A door opened. Light poured in.

I blinked rapidly and squinted into the light.

“Huh?” I found myself sitting in some sort of booth or capsule. It was round, like a hollowed-out sphere, with thick metal seams studded with hefty bolts.

The seat felt dry and soft, upholstered in rich red velvet.

Before me lay a control panel, dials and knobs and levers.

A large wheel, like something from a submarine, jutted out of the wall to the right of me, half a foot above my head.

Where in the world am I? What happened to the roller coaster car?

Before I could cry out, a white-gloved hand shot through the open porthole door. It grabbed me by my collar.

“Hey—whoa!” I blurted as I was yanked out of the capsule and out into the open.

A man towered over me, examining me with cold, dark eyes. Something in his expression made me feel like a bug squirming beneath a glass.

I tried to be brave and stare back at him. But it was hard because I was so completely terrified.

His black hair was slicked back. On his upper lip was a mustache so thin it looked as if he had drawn it on with a pen. He wore gray flannel trousers and a red pin-striped vest over a starched white shirt.

He looked neat and respectable enough. But there was something slightly strange about him.

Something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

“You're a good one!” he cried.

A good *what*? I opened my mouth to ask him just that.

“Be quiet!” he bellowed before I got a word out.

I snapped my mouth shut and stared at him. His dark eyes burned into mine.

“Take off those clothes!” he shouted.

“Excuse me?” I cried.

My clothes were sopping wet from the rain, but there was no way I was going to take them off. I didn't even change in the locker room in front of kids I had known all my life.

The man grabbed me and started to pull my shirt off over my head.

“All right, all right!” I protested, wriggling away from him. I wasn't going to let

him undress me, that was for sure.

I jumped behind the capsule where he couldn't see me and pulled off my clothes. Then I threw them over to the man.

Panic surged through me as I watched him scoop up my clothes and take them over to a closet. I shivered as he unlocked the closet with a key from a heavy, jangling key ring.

While he worked, he muttered to himself. I couldn't make out any words.

He stuffed my clothes into the closet. Then he returned with a pile of shiny, silvery fabric. He thrust it at me.

"Put it on!" he snapped.

"But—"

"Just do it," he ordered. "Let's not start off on the wrong foot. There's no room for rebels and upstarts in my show."

What show?

With cold, trembling hands I climbed into the silver outfit.

It was all one piece, made of a silver fabric. A row of silver hooks ran from the collar to the inside ankle of the right leg. My hands were trembling so hard, I kept mismatching the hooks and eyes.

Finally I managed to do up every last hook and eye. I looked down at myself.

I was so embarrassed!

I like my clothes loose, preferably baggy. This outfit was nearly as tight as a wetsuit. I wouldn't wear something like this—even on Halloween.

The man walked around me, studying me. He seemed to be pleased.

"Good," he muttered with a sharp nod. "Very good. No traces. No traces whatsoever."

No traces?

"No traces of what?" I asked in a squeaky voice.

"SHUT UP!" he shouted and slapped me across the face.

I rubbed my stinging cheek as tears sprang to my eyes.

He smiled almost kindly then and wagged his finger at me. "Be a good boy and that won't happen again," he told me in a soft, silky voice.

I nodded numbly.

Then he grabbed my arm and led me away from the capsule.

I stared back at it. That capsule, whatever it was, was my only link to my real life. My only way out of this nightmare.

We were in a huge building, as big as an airplane hangar. It was cold and poorly lit. But I could make out low walls on either side of us as he dragged me down a long hall.

Doors flashed past me, most of them closed. The open rooms were too dark to see inside.

I didn't have time to look, anyway. Every time I slowed down to get a look, the man gave my arm such a jerk it practically came out of its socket.

I heard muffled voices coming from behind the low walls.

Someone shouted. A girl.

Not Ashley.

Several men and women stood talking in the hall. The men wore striped shirts and baggy pants, pleated in front. The women wore long dark dresses down to their ankles, with big shoulder pads. They wore dark lipstick.

The fashions told me what I had already guessed. I had traveled back in time. But to when?

Where was I? What was going on? I had absolutely no idea.

The people fell silent as we edged past them. I could feel their eyes on me, following me.

I wanted to cry out for help. But their expressions were cold and unfriendly.

They were staring at me as if I were from Mars.

The hall widened as we passed a giant glass tank filled with water. Long tendrils of pink and orange seaweed floated in the water.

A large fish fluttered out from behind a huge purple sea fan.

I looked at the fish more closely. My heart nearly stopped.

The fish had a human face! The face of a boy, eight or nine years old.

The body was covered with shimmering green scales. And he had a long swishing fishtail in place of legs and feet.

“You like my little pet?” the man asked me.

I stared after it in horror as the man dragged me away.

I heard my voice rise to a panicky shriek. “What *is* this place?”

His only answer was an arm-wrenching yank.

I cast one last backward glance at the tank. The fish-boy had swum up to the glass and pressed his face to it. He stared at me, with large, dark, terrified eyes.

A stream of bubbles flew out of his mouth.

He was mouthing a word through the water and the glass, trying desperately to be understood.

“Run!” he said. “Run!”



The man tightened his grip on me. There was no way I could run.

Where was I going? What was going to happen to me?

Would I wind up in a fish tank like that boy?

Finally the man pushed me through a dark doorway. I stumbled and fell up a set of stairs. "Climb up," he ordered. I crawled up the stairs on my hands and knees.

I stood up slowly, my heart thundering in my chest.

It was dark and stuffy. I reached out. My trembling fingers felt a drape or a curtain.

I groped around, searching frantically for an opening in the curtain. Then, with a sickening jolt, I became aware of others beside me in the darkness, breathing softly.

I shrank back into my own space and froze, waiting, listening.

I heard a sniffing sound. Then a cry.

A human cry.

I sagged in relief. Whoever it was sounded as scared as I was.

"Hurry, hurry! Ladies and gents!" A loud voice pierced the darkness.

"Step right up and see the A-mazing Cheechildren of the Future! You won't believe your eyes. They will astound and astonish you. Ask them questions. Ask them anything you like. You won't believe your ears as they tell you of the untold wonders of the near and distant future."

Suddenly bright lights hit my eyes as the curtain scraped back.

A crowd of people in old-fashioned clothes gasped and jostled each other to get a better look.

They were gawking and shouting, pointing up through a row of thick metal bars.

I was standing in a large cage!

In the cage with me stood a dozen or so other kids.

Some were dressed in silvery costumes like mine. Others wore jumpsuits and helmets that resembled space suits in bad science fiction movies. The kid to my left was crying and wiping his nose on his silver sleeve.

But no one noticed or cared.

"Ladies and gents, feast your eyes on Captain Time's Children of the Future." The man who had brought me here now stood to one side of the cage talking to the audience.

He wore a blue blazer and a white captain's hat with a shiny black visor. He thumped the cage bars with a wooden club.

"Go ahead, ladies and gents, don't be afraid. Ask them anything you like. They won't bite."

The crowd murmured softly and continued to stare up at us in disbelief.

"How do you sleep in the future?" a young woman piped up. "In regular beds—"

or what?”

“Standing up,” the kid on the other side of me answered in a droning voice, like a robot. “With our eyes open. Children of the Future never dream. Never have nightmares. It is a perfect world. We are lucky Children of the Future.”

“What do you eat?” a man called out from the back of the room.

“We do not eat food,” a skinny kid answered in that same zombie-like voice. “The Children of the Future eat only vitamin pills! We are very healthy. We are lucky Children of the Future.”

No sleep. No food. What kind of a future did these kids come from? Not *my* future.

What was wrong with them?

“Vitamin pills?” an audience member piped up. “I don’t believe it.”

“You’re totally right not to believe it!” a girl’s voice rang out from behind me.

The noise level of the crowd rose.

“Don’t listen to him!” the girl went on. “Kids of the future eat and dream and sleep just like you do. We eat food, too. We eat junk food. Lots of junk food. Fast food, we call it. Microwave burritos and frozen garbage pizza.”

My heart leaped. There was only one person I knew who liked frozen garbage pizza.

“Ashley!” I shouted over the rising noise of the crowd. “Ashley—I’m here!”



“James!”

Ashley pushed her way through the cage. Grabbing my hand, she squeezed it hard as if she were making sure I was real.

I squeezed back. It was great to see her.

My cousin was wearing a silver outfit like mine. Her long blond hair was tucked up into an ugly silver bonnet. It fit tight like a bathing cap.

“Can you believe it, James?” she whispered. “We’re the kids of the future!”

A woman tapped the bars with the tip of her umbrella. “What’s that girl have on her teeth?” she asked.

“It’s a mark of royalty of a princess from the future,” Captain Time explained.

“No, it’s not,” Ashley broke in. “They’re braces.”

“False teeth?” someone asked.

“No,” Ashley corrected him. “Braces to straighten my teeth. You know, from an orthodontist? Kids of the future have straight teeth, whether they want them or not.”

The people in the crowd murmured.

“Don’t listen to her!” Captain Time spoke out. “This girl is a princess from the future. That strange pink and purple substance on her teeth was put on her teeth at birth. It’s the special mark of a princess!”

“What is that man talking about?” I whispered.

Ashley frowned. “Actually, that’s what I told him when he first yanked me out of the capsule. I think he likes the idea that he’s caught himself a real live princess for his freak show.”

“Let’s hear a round of applause for the Princess of the Future!” Captain Time shouted.

Scattered clapping.

I don’t think they believed him.

I don’t think they believed any of us was from the future. Even though Ashley and I really were.

“Do kids have to go to school in the future?” a boy in the audience wanted to know.

“No!” another member of the zombie troupe answered. “In the future children don’t have to go to school. They can sit at home and watch radio with pictures! Children of the Future are lucky.”

“Yay for the future!” The kids in the audience broke out in cheers.

“I only wish,” I whispered to Ashley.

She shrugged. “Yeah, well, the Captain has his own ideas about the future.”

Another question quickly followed the last. “How do you get around? By electric car?”

“No!” a silver-costumed girl responded. “Children of the Future travel by jet pack! We can fly anywhere we like, any time we like.”

“Gimme a break!” I murmured.

“Is there a cure for the flu?” a man in the crowd asked.

“In the future,” one of the other kids spoke up, “there is no disease. Everyone takes an anti-disease pill, and no one ever gets sick.”

“Yeah, right,” Ashley muttered under her breath.

The crowd didn’t seem to believe this any more than we did.

They began to grumble. A few started to hiss and boo at us.

I felt something jab me in the leg. A man was poking his cane through the bars at me. I tried to kick him.

“Animal!” the man shouted, shaking his fist at me. “Freak.”

The others joined in, calling us names. I felt something sting my forehead.

I reached up and rubbed the spot.

I looked down at the floor near my feet. It was a peanut. Someone had actually thrown a peanut at me!

Kids in the audience began throwing them by the handful.

Ashley and I ducked.

“All right, ladies and gents!” Captain Time shouted, ringing the curtain shut. “Show’s over. Next show starts in twenty minutes. Get in line and purchase your tickets. Two bits a piece.”

Ashley grabbed my hand.

“We have to do this again in twenty minutes?” I asked.

“Can you believe it? We have to do eighteen shows a day, James,” she told me. I followed her off the platform and into a room backstage.

All the kids crowded into it, grumbling and whining. There wasn’t any furniture. Just bales of hay. Loose hay was spread on the packed dirt floor.

The kids threw themselves down on the bales of hay.

Most of them were scrawny. Their faces were pale and their eyes were hollow. Kids of the future didn’t look too lucky to me. Or too healthy, either.

I pulled Ashley into the corner. I had a ton of questions on my mind.

But she put a finger to my mouth. “Not here,” she warned. “The Captain’s spies are everywhere.”

She grabbed my hand and led me into another room no bigger than a large closet. It held a single beat-up couch.

“The Captain lets me use this room,” she explained, taking a seat on the musty-smelling couch. “Because I’m the Princess.”

“At least he gives you the princess treatment. Me, he handled like a punching bag.”

Ashley shook her head. “You’ve just got to do what he says, James. Do what he says and he won’t hurt you. Sit down.” She patted the cushion next to her, and a puff of dust rose up.

I sank down next to her. “So what is this place?” I demanded.

“A carnival in Firelight Park,” she explained in a tired voice. “We’re definitely back in the park again. I don’t know what year. It’s nineteen thirty-something.”

I nodded quickly. "Do all these kids come from the future?"

"I can't tell. Most of them are so tired and confused, I'm not sure they even know anymore. A lot of them are just runaways and orphans from this time. Captain Time tries to make all of us give the same stupid answers, anyway."

"Who is this guy?" I asked.

"He runs the carnival," Ashley explained. "He's the son of the owner of Firelight Park. His father lets him run this carnival. He uses the money the carnival earns for his experiments."

"Experiments?" I asked. I remembered with a shudder the fish-boy in the tank.

"All kinds of experiments," Ashley explained. "But mostly, time travel."

I nodded. "I *knew* that capsule was a time machine the moment I saw it."

Ashley sighed. "What are we going to do, James?"

It seemed pretty simple to me. "Ask Captain Time to send us back to the future?" I suggested.

She tossed her head impatiently. "Don't you think I've already asked him a dozen times? He won't do it, James. I've begged. The harder I beg, the louder he says no. He wants to keep us here. Like prisoners."

I thought of the bales of hay in the room next door. "Like wild animals in a zoo. Then we've got to find a way to escape. We—"

"There you are, Princess!" Captain Time strode briskly into the room.

"Ah, Princess. Entertaining our newest time traveler, I see." He flashed an oily smile and ran one white-gloved finger over the pencil-thin mustache.

"This is my cousin, James Dickson. Say hello to the nice man, James." Ashley shot me a meaningful look.

His dark eyes lit up. "Cousins! That's a first. I've transported cousins! Brilliant! Wait till I tell Father. He won't believe me. None of them believe me. They think it's all a hoax.

"I am good, aren't I?" he demanded. "I can transport human life through time. I'm a genius. A genius!"

"Since you are a genius," I suggested politely, "why don't you return us back to our own time?"

"Why would I want to do that?" he asked.

"Because," I explained to him carefully, "we want to go back to our own time and place." Then I got braver. "You're a kidnapper if you keep us here against our wills."

"Send us back," Ashley joined in boldly. "Send us back, and we won't press charges."

He smiled sadly. "Believe me, Princess. I'd *love* to send you back."

"Great!" we both exclaimed.

"There's only one little problem," he added, shaking his head. "I don't know how."



I sprang to my feet. “You mean to say you can bring people back in time, but you can’t *return* them?” I cried.

“Yes,” he replied sadly. “I’ve got the *back* part down pat. It’s the *forward* part I’m a little shaky on. Can’t get the hang of it at all.”

He pulled a gold watch from the pocket of his trousers. He tapped the glass face. “It’s time to rest up. Only ten more minutes until the next show.”

“What if we don’t want to do the show?” I demanded.

He paused in the doorway and turned. “But you must. You have no choice. And you, Princess”—he waved long white-gloved fingers over at Ashley—“kindly stop making up your own answers to the audience’s questions. Just stick to the script.”

Ashley snatched off her silver cap and shook out her blond hair. “And what if we don’t stick to the script?” she demanded.

“Listen to me.” His voice fell to a deadly whisper as he moved closer to her. “Princess or no princess, you will do as I tell you. Is that crystal clear, Princess?”

“Yes, sir!” Ashley gave a sullen salute.

Captain Time glared at Ashley. “The last troublemaker found himself in a large tank of cold water covered with slimy green scales.”

So I was right! Captain Time *did* turn that boy into a fish!

Captain Time might be a genius. But he was an evil genius, I decided.

“Do we have an understanding?” he asked.

We both turned to the Captain at the same time and snapped to attention.

“Yes, sir!” we barked.

“As soon as Captain Time left, I ran to the door and peered around the corner.

The hallway was empty.

I signaled to Ashley. “Come on. Let’s go!”

Her eyes widened in fear. “You heard him. The show’s about to begin. We have to get ready. He always starts on time.”

“Who cares? You mean to tell me you want to sit around here for the rest of your life doing eighteen shows a day? Let’s get out of here,” I urged.

Ashley tucked her hair neatly back into her cap and sighed wearily. “Forget it, James.”

I shook my head in confusion. “Forget it?” I repeated. “You mean you don’t want to escape?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, James. But how far do you think we would get wearing these trick-or-treat costumes?”

I stared at our costumes. We sparkled like a pair of foil-wrapped human hoagies.

Ashley had a point.

“Besides,” she added sensibly, “getting out of here won’t help us get back to our time.”

I nodded and chewed my lower lip. “The time machine is in this building—right?”

“So the best thing we can do until we can get near it,” Ashley explained, “is to behave like Captain Time’s good little Children of the Future. That way he’ll trust us. Or at least forget about us—”

“Long enough for us to find a way out of here back to our own time,” I finished for her.

So Ashley and I huddled together on the couch while she gave me a crash course on how to answer the audience’s questions about the future.

What we ate. What we wore. How we slept. How we traveled. She even demonstrated how we danced.

The dance was especially dumb.

But I concentrated hard. I learned every step and memorized every word of Captain Time’s script for good, little, lucky Children of the Future.

It was just like studying for a unit test.

Only this was one test we had to pass. If we didn’t, we both knew what would happen.

We would be left back.

Back in the past.

Forever.



I lay awake for hours. Bits of straw scratched my bare skin through the thin silver fabric of my costume.

I breathed deeply, fake snoozing, until I thought the whole roomful of kids was sound asleep.

Then I rolled over and shook Ashley awake.

My cousin usually doesn't react well when you wake her up in the middle of the night.

When our families spent Christmas together one time years ago, we made a pact to wake up at three o'clock in the morning. We wanted to see if we could catch Santa Claus in the act.

I went into Ashley's room to wake her up—and she let out a scream that shook the house!

No silent night for us.

Both families came tearing in to see what terrible thing had happened.

There I was, standing in my pajamas in the middle of the room. I mumbled something about Ashley having a nightmare. Pretty lame.

Now, lying on the straw-strewn floor of our prison, I shook Ashley's shoulder. She wouldn't budge. Maybe she was dreaming about being home again.

This was no time to dream. We were in the middle of a nightmare.

Finally I took a piece of straw and stuck it up her nose.

Good move.

She wiggled her nose and sat up, glaring at me. "James—"

"Shhhhhh." I pressed my hand over her mouth. She stared at me with wide, frightened eyes.

Around us, the other Children of the Future continued to snore.

Slowly I took my hand off her mouth and helped her to her feet.

We made our way through the dark room.

Earlier, after the last show of the night, two tough-looking men in black bowler hats led us down the long hallway to another room. We sat at long picnic tables while they served us what looked like pig swill.

Not that I've ever actually seen pig swill. But that's what I imagined it looked like. It was bits of fat and gristle swimming in gray, greasy goop.

It made the food in my school cafeteria look like a gourmet feast.

I couldn't believe that the other kids were shoveling the swill into their mouths with both hands.

No way would Ashley and I touch the food. When no one was looking, we both dumped it onto the floor beneath the table.

Afterward, the same two men herded us back into the room behind the stage. They told us to shut up and go to sleep.

Most of the kids had fallen into an exhausted sleep immediately.

So far so good.

The door to the room behind the stage wasn't locked. Captain Time probably figured there was nowhere we could go.

I heard a sudden loud snort—and froze.

A guard was asleep on duty. His chair tipped back against the wall. His bowler hat covered his eyes. His mouth was wide open, sucking in great big mouthfuls of air as he snored.

I tiptoed past him, down the long hall, past the room where we had eaten, past the giant fish tank.

We stopped long enough to peer inside. It was empty except for the tall orange and yellow fronds of seaweed waving eerily to and fro.

What had happened to the fish-boy?

Maybe the Captain let him out of the tank at night to sleep in a real bed.

We passed the rows of doors and finally came out into a larger room. Ashley pointed.

In the far corner stood the time machine.

A greenish-yellow light shone out of its porthole windows. We ran toward it. As we approached, we heard a high-pitched hum.

The Captain had made it easier for us. He had left the power on.

Ashley ran ahead of me and yanked open the round door. "Come on, James," she urged in a hushed whisper. "Let's go."

I hesitated. "Go where? How?"

But Ashley didn't seem to care. She was already dropping onto the red seat. She patted the cushion next to her. "Out of here. That's all that matters."

I wasn't so sure.

"Hurry, James!"

I stared hard at her. Her eyes were huge and glassy. Was this just another adventure to her? Didn't she realize how serious this was?

Reluctantly I climbed in beside her. I kept the door open. I hate closed-in spaces. I don't even like sleeping in a tent.

"Okay, James," she said in a businesslike way. "Let's try fiddling with some of these knobs."

I stared helplessly at the panel. Not a single one of the knobs, dials, or levers was labeled.

Who knew what they did? Only the Captain. And the Captain was fast asleep.

I hoped.

Ashley leaned over me and swung the door shut.

"Wouldn't want to fall out in the middle of time," she muttered.

Very funny.

Then she reached for the nearest knob. "Let's try twisting this cute little knob to the left," she chatted nervously. "Maybe the machine is programmed. Maybe the machine will just reverse itself and send us back."

"Ashley!" I warned.

"What harm could it do?" she asked innocently.



I pulled her hand off the knob. “Have you lost your mind completely?” I demanded.

Her blue eyes narrowed to slits. “No, James, but I think you have. Don’t you want to get out of here?”

“Of course I do. But I want to get out of here in one piece. You don’t know the first thing about time travel, Ashley. I do. I’ve been reading all about it ever since last summer. Time travel can be very dangerous,” I told her.

She sat back in her seat and folded her arms across her silver jumpsuit. She rolled her eyes.

“All right. Tell me how dangerous.”

I figured I’d tell it to her straight.

“Time travel involves taking huge risks,” I told her. “But we don’t even have a way to judge the risk. We’re traveling blind. We have no idea where we might wind up.”

“So?”

“So? So we could easily pop up in the middle of a rock! Or at the bottom of an ocean. Or who knows where!” I explained.

“All right, James.” She sighed. “I think I get the idea. But maybe we’d pop up safe and sound back at Paramount’s Kings Island. Or in our own beds. Or in your mom’s kitchen, just as she’s taking one of her chocolate pies out of the oven.”

I nodded reluctantly. I could almost smell the chocolate pie.

Ashley’s blue eyes sparkled. “Then don’t you think it’s worth the risk, James? I do. I say we go for it!”

She reached for the knob.

I eyed her tensely. But this time I didn’t try and stop her.

I knew she wasn’t going to give up until she had tried to use the machine.

I held my breath as she twisted the knob.

The arrows on the dials didn’t move.

Nothing happened.

We stared at each other in disappointment.

“Okay, try that blue lever next to it,” I suggested.

Might as well keep at it until we got results.

She pushed it down, an inch. We both braced ourselves.

Again, nothing happened.

She moved it another inch.

The arrows on the dials started twitching. A high-pitched hum rose around us.

Ashley turned to stare at me. Her blue eyes widened. Her face twisted in horror.

“Noooooo!” she wailed.

Spidery lines sprouted at the corners of her eyes and crawled down her cheeks,

past her ears and onto her neck. As her skin wrinkled, her cheeks and ears sagged.

Liver spots spread across her forehead and scalp. Her hair turned gray and fell out in clumps.

Ashley cried out for help. Three of her teeth blackened and fell out over her gums. She caught them in a hand that looked like a claw.

My cries joined hers. I felt the flesh shrink on my bones, and my spine curve like a bow.

I felt my right eye droop down onto my cheek. Everything got blurry then.

I heard an old man moaning. The old man was me.

Part of me knew we were both aging at a rapid speed. That same part knew that if we didn't do something soon to reverse it—we would die and turn into skeletons in seconds.

But most of me just wanted to shrivel up and die—and get it over with!

Every bone in my body ached. I couldn't see. I was too weak to scream.

With what remained of my strength, I fell on the blue lever and struggled to pull it back up.

“Pull it, James! Pull it!” Ashley croaked.

“I can't!” I croaked back. “I can't!”



The lever was stuck.

I couldn't budge it.

I opened my mouth and flapped my gums at Ashley, "Help me pull!"

Her knobby old head trembled, and she smacked her lips.

"Help me pull it!" I pleaded.

Ashley lowered her wrinkled, spotted hands over mine.

"Pull! Pull!" I gasped.

Finally the lever began to edge back up. A fraction of an inch at a time.

The needles in the dials stopped twitching.

The deafening roar of the machine died down to a faint hum.

I glanced over at my cousin. With a surge of relief I saw that she was getting younger.

Her wrinkled skin grew smooth and rosy pink, and her teeth popped back into her head.

Her hair returned to silken, shiny blond.

Her hands grew plump and strong-looking.

While all this was happening, I could feel my own spine growing stronger and straighter. My skin tightened on my bones. It was great to feel the teeth in my head once again.

Our hands fell away from the lever.

"Whew!"

"You're not kidding!"

I flopped back against the velvet cushions, exhausted.

"Wow. That was close." Ashley panted. "Oh, James, I don't think I ever want to get old."

"Me, neither," I agreed. Then I grinned at her. "You should have seen how gross you looked!" I teased.

"Me?" She gave an outraged squeal.

"You looked like a shriveled-up old raisin!"

"If I was a raisin, James, you were a prune!"

"Fine," I said. "We both looked pretty gross. Touch that blue lever again and I'll break all ten of your fingers."

"Okay," she agreed. "I'll just try turning this big wheel here, instead."

Before I could stop her, Ashley had reached up and spun the heavy wheel above our heads.

The machine began to rumble.

We stared at each other. Something was definitely happening.

The machine began to vibrate. The light dimmed from yellow-green to deep blood red.

“Whoa!” I braced myself.

“What’s happening, James?” Ashley cried out.

The red light began to blink and the vibrations shook us. The machine was shuddering and rumbling.

“Maybe it’s working!” I called out over the roar of the machine.

“1990s, here we come!” Ashley exclaimed, pumping her fist in the air in triumph!



After a few seconds the machine fell silent and still. The lights brightened to green.

Where had the machine taken us? I wondered.

My heart beat wildly. Maybe it had worked. Maybe we were back in our time.

I reached over and unlatched the door.

But someone else swung the door open before I got a chance.

Captain Time.

He stood outside the capsule, wearing a long black satin robe and velvet slippers. His black hair was messy from sleep. But he looked wide awake now.

And angry.

He slapped the heavy wooden club into the palm of his hand.

Slap. Slap. Slap.

“Come out of there, you two,” he said through gritted teeth.

Ashley and I exchanged looks of pure dread. She gave my hand a quick squeeze.

We both knew we were in major trouble.

We stood before the Captain with our heads lowered. Too bad *fear* doesn't send you hurtling through time. My fear could have carried me clear into the next century!

“Which one of you turned that wheel?” Captain Time demanded.

After a brief nervous silence Ashley piped up, “I did, Captain. Sir,” she added meekly.

He chuckled softly. “Thank you, Princess. That wheel sets off the alarm. And the alarm woke me. And here I am. And here you are. What have you to say for yourselves?”

“Sorry?” I tried timidly.

“Not good enough!” he bellowed.

I jumped half a foot.

“I am not happy,” Captain Time said. “Not happy at all.”

What did that mean?

Once again I pictured the boy in the fish tank. I saw myself swimming beside him.

“We're really, really, sorry!” I insisted.

“Are you really?” He frowned at me. “Well, I'll forgive you this time.”

I practically crumpled to the floor. I was so relieved!

No fish tank. Ashley and I were lucky.

This time.

“Now,” he announced as he pulled his gold watch out of the pocket of his robe, “it's time to hit the hay. And I do mean hay.”

Ashley and I turned away reluctantly from the time machine.

“Listen to me,” he told us as he led us back to our little room behind the stage. “I’m not a bad man. I don’t want you to be unhappy. Believe me, I wish I could send you both home. I really do.”

I wasn’t sure I believed him.

But it wasn’t like I had any choice.

We trudged down the long hallway. Gas lamps burned eerily in brackets high on the walls, lighting our way back to our prison.

With every step my heart sank deeper in my chest.

“If you keep performing the show and earning me lots of money,” he went on, “I can continue my work. Who knows? Maybe some day I’ll figure out how to send you back to your own time.”

We paused at the door of our room.

“Some day?” Ashley repeated.

The Captain gave a careless heave of his shoulders. “It might take a few years. Now, in you go,” he ordered, and slammed the door behind us.

“Some day,” Ashley muttered as she tried to make herself a comfortable nest in the straw. “By then our parents will have given up looking for us. Oh, wow. This is terrible. This is worse than being dead.”

I shivered miserably. In the early morning hours the room had grown chilly.

As I pulled some straw over my cold and aching bones, I had to agree with her. What a mess. . . .

Just as I was drifting off into a troubled sleep, I felt someone jab me sharply on the shoulder.

I opened my eyes and sat up with a start. I looked around me. No one there. No one but other kids sleeping in the straw.

But someone had been here a moment ago. I knew it. Because someone had left something behind.

It was lying on the straw pillow I had been sleeping on.

A fish.

A dead fish.

I looked at it in horror.

I knew it was a message. A message from Captain Time.

A warning telling me I was going to end up like that fish.

Dead.



The next morning Ashley and I escaped.

“Hurry up, James!”

I grabbed the ledge of the high window and hoisted myself up. Then I reached down and dragged my cousin after me.

She slithered over the sill in her silvery suit.

We landed with a thud in an alley outside the carnival building.

I took a deep breath of fresh air and blinked in the sunshine. It was midmorning and we were between performances. Ashley had spied the window on our way to breakfast that morning.

We sneaked away after the last show. Now we had fifteen minutes until the next show. We had to get away before they noticed we were missing.

Ashley took off down the alley.

I ran after her and blocked her path. “Wait a minute. You said you had a plan?”

She batted her long eyelashes at me. “Of course I have a plan, James. Don’t I always have a plan? The plan is to find The Beast.”

“That’s your plan?” I asked.

“Not much of a plan, is it?” she admitted.

“Well, we found it last year,” she added.

I nodded. She was right. Last summer, after searching all over Firelight Park, we had finally come upon The Beast.

The Beast had saved us, whisking us away just in time.

Maybe The Beast could save us again.

“I don’t suppose you know where we might find it?” I asked her.

She answered by pointing to the giant Ferris wheel towering over the rest of the park.

“The Ferris wheel?” I repeated. “How will the Ferris wheel help us get back to the present?”

She rolled her eyes. “James, we’ll ride the Ferris wheel.”

“And the Ferris wheel will—what?” I demanded.

She rolled her eyes. “The Ferris wheel will give us a view of the entire park. Maybe when we’re up high, we’ll see The Beast. That is, unless you have a better plan, James?”

I shook my head gloomily. My stomach growled. I almost wished I’d eaten this morning’s breakfast swill. Almost.

“It’s hard to think on an empty stomach,” I complained.

I thought of my mother’s pot roast. Her spinach lasagna. Chocolate pie.

“Let’s go,” I said. I grabbed Ashley and ran down the alleyway toward the boardwalk.

We had never been in Firelight Park during the day. The torches standing on top

of the poles were out. The sun shone down out of a pale blue, cloudless sky.

It was a great day to visit an amusement park. The boardwalk was packed with people strolling along to the music of an old-fashioned organ.

At first we strolled, too, trying to blend in. It wasn't easy.

The women wore flowered dresses down to their ankles. The men wore suit jackets. I'd forgotten that in the old days people dressed up to go to an amusement park.

Was there any such thing as casual clothes?

A group of kids passed us. They wore long, baggy shorts that fell to below their knees, and baggy shirts. Instead of sneakers they wore heavy brown wooden shoes.

"Look!" one of them shouted out, pointing at us. "Freaks from the future!"

The others laughed. Ashley and I picked up our pace. Maybe if we slipped through the crowd like a couple of silver streaks, no one would notice us.

We ran, losing the kids in the crowd. We passed a building with a sign that said CRITTER CORRAL.

It looked like a bunch of farm animals—pigs and cows and geese.

We slowed to a fast walk as we passed a purple and gold tent. Oriental flute music floated out of it. A tall man in a turban stood outside the entrance to the tent. A spotted snake wrapped him from head to toe.

"Step inside and see the asp that stung Cleopatra."

"Gross," Ashley said, tugging on my arm. "Come on, James."

I'd never seen an asp before. And I wasn't going to see one now. I didn't have the two cents admission.

We passed a row of carnival booths. Their red and white lights blinked even in the daylight. The brightly colored pennants flying from their rooftops snapped smartly in the breeze.

There were beanbag tosses, pyramids of heavy wooden bottles to topple with big, soft balls. There were sitting ducks waiting to be picked off in shooting galleries. There were prizes, too. Rows of stuffed animals and Kew-pie dolls.

It was amazing how little amusement parks had changed over the years.

We passed a man throwing daggers at a woman spinning on a big wooden board.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed as a knife just missed her face.

We passed a dwarf in a purple tank shirt and striped trousers. He was lying on a bed of sharp nails. His muscular arms were folded across his chest. He looked perfectly comfortable lying there on about a thousand razor-sharp nails.

He reached out as we ran by and grabbed Ashley's ankle.

"Hey, girlie," he called out. "For a penny I'll let you step on me."

Ashley stared down at him in disgust.

"I don't have a penny," she told him.

The dwarf grinned. "I'll let you do it for free. Go ahead. It won't hurt me. Step on my chest."

"No, thanks," Ashley stammered, backing off.

We ran on, the dwarfs mocking laughter ringing in our ears.

Then we passed a food stand and I just couldn't help myself. I stopped and stared up at the sign, my poor stomach gurgling like crazy.

CONEY ISLAND DOGS, the sign said. FIT FOR A MILLIONAIRE.

I peered behind the counter.

A row of hot dogs sizzled on the grill. I remembered how delicious they had tasted. And they only cost three cents!

I thought of the mason jar in the bottom drawer of my bureau, filled to the top with pennies I'd never even bothered to take to the bank to trade for bigger money.

I thought of all the times I had dropped a penny and not bothered picking it up. That's how little pennies meant to me.

What I wouldn't give now for three lousy cents.

A woman pushing a toddler in a big wicker stroller stopped beside me to order three Coney Island Dogs.

She hesitated when she saw me staring at her.

"Make that four," she called out to the grill man.

"You poor kid!" she said with a sad shake of her head. "That dreadful Captain Time doesn't take very good care of you kids. It's a wonder the authorities aren't all over him. Here, take it."

She thrust one of her hot dogs into my hand.

I started sputtering thanks, but she waved me away.

"Don't thank me. Just run along before my husband catches us. He hates when I give to beggars."

I gave out with a sickly smile.

First I'm a freak and now I'm a beggar.

I was coming up in the world.

I caught up with Ashley and showed her my prize. I tore it in two and gave her half.

"James! You genius!" she declared as she blew on her half of the steaming hot dog.

We gobbled the dog in seconds. By the time we were finished, we were standing at the foot of the Ferris wheel.

We craned our necks, staring up at the many colored seats, swinging in the breeze. The wheel spun around like a giant wire pinwheel. It looked like fun.

We jumped in line for the next ride, ignoring the stares of the people ahead of us.

They obviously thought we had no business being there. We belonged in the carnival. We weren't supposed to be having fun.

We're *not* having fun! I wanted to tell them.

Our heads turned automatically. We were keeping a lookout for the blue-uniformed guards. Or worse, the Captain's men in their black bowler hats.

By this time Captain Time would have discovered we were gone. Maybe he had already sent out a patrol.

We were both relieved when the wheel started loading for the next ride.

Ashley nudged me. "James," she whispered. "What will we do for tickets?"

"Admission fee covers all rides," I reminded her. She looked relieved.

We climbed into a red seat and fastened the buckles on the brown straps. Then

up we swung. The car rocked to and fro, and we moved farther up into the air.

Higher and higher we rose up over the park. The breeze felt wonderful.

I threw back my head and let the warm sun beat down on my face. I had been indoors so long, I was beginning to feel like a fungus! A fungus in a tacky silver suit.

Ashley was enjoying herself, too. She shook her hair loose from the silvery cap and let it whip around in the wind.

The Ferris wheel swung us up to the very top, and there we hung, suspended high above the park.

“Oh, wow!” Ashley breathed. “Isn’t it awesome!”

It *was* awesome.

Beneath our dangling feet, the park stretched out in all directions.

“Look!” I shouted to Ashley, pointing. “There’s the Shoot-the-Chute.”

“Cool!” she exclaimed.

There was the Tilt-a-Whirl, too. Even from way up there, I could hear the screams of its riders, rising and falling like a distant siren. Nearby, the pink and blue merry-go-round spun in the sunshine like a toy top.

For the first time since we arrived, I felt a little hope. There had to be a way out of here, and we could find it.

Then my eye fell on the big warehouse that housed the carnival. An artist had painted a giant portrait of Captain Time in his blue blazer and white hat on the roof. He was grinning and holding up a huge pocket watch.

CAPTAIN TIME’S CHILDREN OF THE FUTURE was written out in fancy script across the bottom.

Captain Time’s eyes were huge and black and seemed to be staring straight up at us.

I shuddered.

Ashley poked me hard in the ribs. “There it is, James!” she cried. “I see it! There’s The Beast! Now we can go home!”



“Where?” I cried excitedly.

She pointed.

Beyond the park’s high wooden fence lay a thick grove of trees.

It looked so familiar.

I stared harder at it.

No doubt about it. On the other side of the fence there seemed to be some sort of wooden scaffolding jutting out of the trees.

I remembered the last time we had slipped through a wooden fence to get to The Beast.

And The Beast did run through a thick grove of trees.

My heart began to beat faster.

“Yes!” I cried happily. “There it is!”

The car began to swing back toward the earth.

“Quick, James!” Ashley cried excitedly. “Let’s memorize the way there from here.”

Each time we swung around, I did my best to figure out a path. Bumper cars, a pond, a green-and-white striped tent with wild animals pictured on it.

Finally we fell dizzily back to the earth for the last time. I was almost sorry to step off the Ferris wheel.

As soon as our feet hit the ground, we were off and running through the crowds.

Past the bumper cars.

Past the pond where little kids dressed in fancy sailor outfits raced model sailboats.

Down the narrow alley between the animal tent and a row of empty cages.

We raced along the high wooden fence, searching for a way through to the other side.

“Here!” I shouted to Ashley.

Someone had dug a deep hole underneath the fence. I fell to my knees and worked my way underneath.

I pulled myself out on the other side. Then I turned to help Ashley. But she didn’t need any help.

My skinny cousin slid underneath like a silver eel.

We dusted off our suits, then dashed through the trees toward the large wooden structure that loomed up ahead.

It *was* The Beast.

It *had* to be The Beast.

What else could it be?

Ashley cried out, “No!” and crumpled to her knees.

“No! No! No!”

It wasn't The Beast.

We were staring at an old barn, half-torn down.

I threw myself down beside Ashley on the grass. For a long time we lay there in gloomy silence, staring up at the blue sky.

We didn't say anything. We didn't need to say anything.

We both knew what we had to do.

We had to get up and go back to the carnival, back to our prison.

What choice did we have?



“I want you to see for yourself how brilliant I am,” Captain Time boasted. He feverishly worked the controls of his time machine.

Ashley and I stood behind him, watching him work. It had been three days since we made our trip through the park in search of The Beast.

The Captain had been furious with us. But he had forgiven us once again. This morning he had pulled us out of the second show to watch him bring someone else back from the future.

I felt a little excited.

Maybe he would bring someone we knew. Maybe someone with *food!*

By now I was starved. All I could think of was hot dogs and root beer and ice cream and popcorn balls and candy apples.

Even Ashley was beginning to miss food. The night before, we were so hungry, we actually ate the peanuts the kids in the audience threw at us.

Talk about desperate! I figure that’s about as low as you can get.

That’s how bad things were getting.

“Ah-hah!” the Captain cried as the machine began to shake and shudder and glow bright red. “Let’s see who the lucky person from the future is today!”

We watched as the capsule began to rock heavily from side to side, thumping and grinding against the floor.

“Wha—What’s happening?” Ashley asked uneasily, beginning to back away.

The machine rocked violently now, back and forth, slamming hard against the floor.

Something very big and very strong was working its way out.

“What’s wrong?” I shouted over the pounding racket.

Captain Time cleared his throat nervously. “No problem, I’m sure,” he explained. “Don’t be so fearful, children.”

The rocking stopped. The machine fell completely still.

The three of us waited and watched in silence, but nothing happened.

The Captain seemed relieved. “See? I told you. No problem. Now, stand away.”

With a grand sweep of one arm, he waved us back. With the other he reached out and opened the hatch.

A long black beak jutted out from the time machine.

The beak swung hard. It caught the Captain on the side of the head. Pecked him in the temple. I could see a bloody gash on the Captain’s forehead.

The Captain staggered back and fell sprawling to the ground. He didn’t move.

With a fierce cry a great black reptile head rose from the time machine. Its jaws opened wide. The jaws were lined with razor-sharp teeth.

Enormous black claws scrabbled at the sides as it struggled to get out.

It pulled free one vast black leathery wing, then another. It looked as if it were

hatching from the huge metal egg of the capsule.

For a few moments it perched on the top of the capsule, staring down at the stunned captain. Then it opened its long beak in a deafening shriek.

Ashley screamed. "James! It's a pterodactyl!"

The creature turned its glowing green eyes in our direction. Letting out another fearful screech, it flapped its great black wings once.

With a loud snap of its jaws, it hopped to the floor. Its neck shot forward as it moved toward us.

"Run, James!" Ashley shouted.

I couldn't move.

Ashley shook me. "Run!" she screamed right into my ear before she herself ran for cover. "Run for your life!"

But I couldn't move. I was frozen in fear.

I stared in horror as the fierce prehistoric creature flapped toward me, snapping its deadly teeth.



Finally I forced myself to move.

I backed up, glancing around frantically for something to defend myself with.

A wooden chair! I picked it up. I lifted it over my head—and heaved it at the pterodactyl.

The monster caught it in one claw. Its yellow-green eyes examined the chair with curiosity.

Meanwhile, I examined its talons.

Each one was the size of a carving knife.

I swallowed hard. I had a bitter taste in my mouth as I imagined those claws digging into my skin.

It snapped its beak over the chair, crushing it. With a horrible crunching sound, it instantly reduced the chair to kindling. When it had finished chewing it up, it tossed aside the last few splinters and returned its attention to me.

A faint moan rose up from the floor.

The Captain sat up, holding his head. When he saw the monster, he let out a strangled cry. “No!”

I watched in horror as the pterodactyl heaved itself into the air. Its leathery wings flapped hard, blasting me with cold, foul-smelling gusts of wind.

There it remained, hovering overhead, fanning me. I backed against the wall and waited for the worst to happen.

But its green eyes weren’t on me. They were fixed hungrily on the Captain.

The Captain cried out in fear as the monster swooped down. It pronged him in its razor talons, lifting him high.

“Help me!” the Captain screamed, legs kicking, arms flailing in midair. “Help me—please!”

Ashley leaped high and tried to grab one of the Captain’s legs as he kicked helplessly six feet above the ground.

I leaped, too. I grabbed hold of the Captain’s shoe. Ashley grabbed on to me. Together we hung on and tried to drag him back to the floor.

Overhead, the monster’s massive leathery wings beat, kicking up dust from the floor, making a harsh whooshing sound. The three of us were playing tug-of-war.

And the Captain was the rope.

At last our team fell into a heap, with the Captain crashing down on top of us.

“Thank you,” he gasped. “Thank you both!”

But we weren’t out of danger yet.

The creature circled above us, shrieking.

“Come on!” I shouted, yanking Ashley to her feet. “We’ve got to run for cover!”

“This way!” the Captain shouted, scrambling to his feet.

The Captain led us away from the time machine, toward the rooms, toward

shelter from the shrieking monster. But the Captain was running too fast for us to keep up.

The monster was gaining on us. I felt its shadow, heavy and cold, sweep over us.

The dark shadow lengthened overhead as the bird swooped low.

Our feet pounded the concrete floor. I never ran so fast in my life. But the ground suddenly gave way. My legs were treading air.

The monster snared us both, one in each claw.

It hooked its long, sharp talons into the fabric of our suits.

Up, up into the air it hoisted us like a pair of helpless mice.



Ashley and I wriggled and thrashed as the creature carried us up toward the high ceiling.

Back and forth it flew. It seemed to be searching for something.

For its nest?

Or maybe a nice craggy cliff to set us down on and tear us apart with its razor-sharp beak.

I waited until the creature soared back down toward the floor. Then I reached over and struggled to pull Ashley's silver suit loose from the talons.

I watched as she fell to the ground with a long scream.

Then I did the same for myself, reaching awkwardly back to work myself loose from the monster's grip.

I heard the sound of fabric tearing. Then I fell and landed with a hard thud.

I gasped painfully for air. The wind was knocked out of me.

An unearthly shriek pierced the air. I jerked my head toward the ceiling in terror.

The monster was circling overhead like a giant black vulture, waiting to pick our bones clean.

It swooped closer and closer, snapping its beak like a set of giant, deadly pincers.

Ashley and I cowered in its shadow.

The green eyes narrowed at us greedily. It seemed to be waiting for the right moment.

It opened and closed its beak rapidly, making a nasty clacking sound.

Ashley covered her mouth.

My stomach lurched. My heart pounded.

The monster's breath smelled sour, like rotten meat.

I covered my head with both arms in a feeble attempt to protect myself. But I knew it was useless.

The monster swooped low, coming to eat us alive.



Then the great bird let out a startled cry.

But despite its struggles, it flew back. Back. To my shock, it was being pulled to the time machine. It flapped and squawked. But it appeared helpless.

The door of the capsule flew open. The monster struggled as the machine sucked it in. Its talons gripped the rim of the open hatch.

Its wings beat madly, struggling against the force of time itself.

But the creature fought a losing battle. Great hunks of the beast were ripped off and sucked into the machine.

The left wing tore free and disappeared, pulled into the time machine.

Ashley howled and clapped her hand over her mouth.

I held my breath, gaping in amazement.

Seconds later the pterodactyl had disappeared. Torn to pieces. Sucked back into time.

I ran to the machine, my entire body trembling.

Ashley and I waited a minute, then got up and ran over to the time machine.

I peered inside. Empty.

Faint wisps of steam rose from the machine. It smelled like roast turkey.

Captain Time appeared, shaken and dazed. He staggered to the time machine and started to examine it.

“We saved your life,” Ashley told him, tugging his sleeve. “Now send us back home.”

He ignored her.

“Yes. Send us home!” I insisted.

Finally he stepped back and scratched his head. “I can’t,” he said softly. “The machine is broken. You’re stuck here forever.”



Much later that night I sprawled on the dusty couch in the Princess's little room.

I was digesting. It was hard work.

I had actually managed to clean my plate at dinner.

Being chased by a pterodactyl can give you an appetite.

"What are we going to do?" Ashley whispered. "How can we escape?"

Before I could answer, I heard voices just outside the little room.

I got up and sneaked over to the door. Holding my breath, I listened.

"You've got to get rid of those kids, Captain," a man's voice was saying.

"You think I don't already know that?" the Captain replied.

"I don't care what you have to do, just do it. The authorities came around today."

"Authorities?" the Captain repeated.

"Don't play dumb with me. The child labor people. They were nosing around the carnival today, asking a lot of questions. Those two kids who escaped the other day? They were running around the fairgrounds, free as you please, causing quite a stir."

"That won't happen again," the Captain said.

"You're right. It won't happen again, because you're going to get rid of them."

"How?" the Captain asked.

"Do whatever you have to do. You're the brilliant scientist. Just make sure that none of them are around here by tomorrow."



“Ashley—did you hear that?” I whispered.

The terrified expression on her face told me that she had heard every word.

“James, we’ve got to get away from here. We have to go anywhere as quickly as we can!”

“Right. But we need a plan,” I told her.

She threw up her hands. “I don’t care about a plan. I just wish we had something to wear other than these stupid, stinking silver suits!”

I stared hard at my cousin. “What did you just say?” I demanded.

She eyed me as if I’d just gone nuts. “I said, *stupid, stinking silver suits.*”

“That’s it!” I exploded.

“What’s it?” She cast me a worried look.

“Our clothes!”

“James, you’re not making any sense.”

“I’m making plenty of sense!” I shouted, then quickly lowered my voice to an excited whisper. “In fact, I’m making brilliant sense.”

Patience, I explained to her my brainstorm. “Ashley, don’t you get it? I understand everything now. The Captain’s been lying to us. He brought that dinosaur from the past into the future.”

“So?” She stared at me, still baffled.

“So, he can send *us* to the future. He knows how to do it. And now I think *I do, too!*”



Ashley peered out between the curtains to make sure no one was lurking out there in the dark, listening to us.

She turned back to me and nodded. “Okay, James. How?”

“Try to remember,” I began, “back to when you first climbed out of the time capsule.”

Ashley nodded, then blushed. “He made me change right away, into this stupid silver suit,” she said. “How could I forget?”

“Exactly!” I exclaimed. “Same with me. At first I thought it was just because he wanted us in a uniform.”

She nodded eagerly, following my every word with wide blue eyes.

“But now I think it’s because the clothes we arrived in were the clothes of the future. The clothes we changed into, even though they look futuristic, are really clothes from the twenties, made out of fabric and thread from this time.”

“James,” she said impatiently. “Is this going to start making sense soon? I think I’m losing hope.”

“Hang on,” I told her. “In one of the time-travel books I read, the woman couldn’t travel back to the previous century unless she was wearing an actual dress from that century. So, if we put our own clothes back on—our clothes from the future—we’ll create a time warp. And our clothes will take us back to our own time.”

Ashley grinned. “I think I get it. Pretty neat!” she cried.

I was really excited now. “When the Captain took away my shorts and shirt and sneakers, he kept mumbling something to himself. ‘No traces! No traces!’ he said. You see, that meant he didn’t want any trace of the 1990s in sight. Because he knew those clothes could take us back to the 1990s.”

“You mean,” Ashley asked, “all we have to do is put on our real clothes—and we can go home? It sounds a little too simple to me.”

“I can’t guarantee anything,” I replied. “But sometimes the answer is simple.” At least I hoped so.

It was our last hope.

Ashley led the way down the hall. “The Captain will be back from dinner any time now,” she whispered. “It’s now or never, James.”

“You’re right,” I agreed.

No one was in sight—except for a single guard. He sat in the big room, reading the funny papers and chuckling to himself. We got down on our hands and knees and crawled past him until we were out of his sight. Then we leaped to our feet and ran past the time machine.

I hurried to the clothes closet and tugged on the handle.

Locked.

I had forgotten, the Captain always kept it locked. The key was on a big ring he kept in his coat pocket.

We were out of luck.

I examined the door. It was pretty flimsily made. The Captain's wooden club was hanging on a hook by the door.

I grabbed it and began to bash at the lock until the door splintered and gave way.

Ashley kept an anxious watch. "Hurry, James," she whispered. "Let's get our clothes and get out of here."

Finally the lock fell off. I swung the door open and searched frantically inside.

The closet was empty.



We were sunk. That was our last hope.

Ashley threw her hands up in despair. “Our clothes, James!” she wailed. “Where have they taken our clothes?”

“Wait a minute!” I exclaimed. I ran my fingers over the floor. In the back I found a square panel. On one side of the square was a small metal ring.

A trapdoor!

I pried up the ring and tugged it. Nothing happened.

I braced my foot against the closet sill and tugged harder.

The door opened. The false bottom of the closet came up.

And there were our clothes, lying in a jumbled pile. Our wonderful modern clothes.

I’d never been so happy to see a maroon-and-white striped soccer jersey in my life. And my lights! My great new sneakers with the lights in the soles!

Ashley started to undo the hooks of her silver jumpsuit right then and there. I stopped her.

“Not here. Someone might come in and catch us. Let’s take our clothes back to the little room. We can change there more safely,” I suggested.

Reluctantly she agreed.

Together, we hurried back to the room, our clothes clutched to our chests.

There, with our backs turned to each other, we tore off the silver suits and climbed back into our own clothes.

When we turned around and faced each other, huge grins spread across our faces.

Ashley was wearing her shiny pink clogs, a pair of white Bermuda shorts, and a pale pink halter. The outfit was a little wrinkled, but it looked great to me.

We stood a moment longer in nervous silence, waiting for the time warp to take effect.

I shook my hands out, as if that might speed up our return to the future.

Ashley stamped her clogs.

My heart was beating a mile a minute. My mouth was dry.

We waited to be swept away from the 1930s.

And waited.

Then we gave up and sank down heavily onto the couch.

“Nice try, James.” Ashley sighed. “But it didn’t work.”

“Wait!” I cried. “I have another idea!”

But the door burst open and the Captain barged in.

He took one look at us in our own clothes and his eyes narrowed to angry slits. “Just what do you two think you’re doing?” he growled.

He grabbed us, one in each hand. “You two are coming with me,” he snarled.

“Where are you taking us?” Ashley choked out.

“Where you’ve wanted to go all along,” he replied, dragging us away.

As if sensing our fears, the Captain stopped in the hallway and turned to Ashley.

“You will make a pretty frog-girl, Princess.”

Then he spun around to me, jabbing me hard in the chest with his index finger.

“Isn’t that right, salamander-boy?” he declared.



Without another word Captain Time dragged us down the hall.

Where was he taking us? To the big fish tank?

No. He pulled us to the time machine.

“Get in,” he commanded.

“Where are you sending us?” I squeaked.

“Back into the past with your friend the pterodactyl. No doubt you’ll make delicious bird food.”

He shoved us inside and leaned in, turning knobs and flipping levers. “Good riddance to future rubbish,” he said. Then he slammed the hatch behind us.

The machine started vibrating.

“James!” Ashley whimpered. “I’m scared. I don’t want to go back to the time of dinosaurs!”

I was so frightened, my teeth were chattering. But I managed to turn the knobs and flip the levers to the exact opposite settings.

Captain Time may have wanted us to go backward. But *forward* was where we were headed, if I had any say.

I waited. I was so nervous I wanted to scream.

I had myself a real case of the screamies.

The screamies.

“I’ve got it!” I exclaimed.

Ashley looked even more scared than before. “What are you talking about now, James?”

I reached into the back pocket of my shorts.

They were mashed nearly flat, but they were still there! My pack of Karamel Kreemies.

“Only two left,” I murmured. “Just enough.”

“Enough for what?” Ashley demanded.

I handed her a Karamel Kreemie. “Just put it in your mouth and chew it, Ashley,” I told her.

She shook her head and pointed at her teeth. “You keep forgetting. My braces!”

I couldn’t believe her. “Ashley, don’t be a jerk. Chew it anyway. So what if it sticks to your teeth? It will save you from being dinosaur food!”

She stared at me, not understanding.

I turned to her and tried to explain. “The candy from the 1990s will create a time warp. I understand completely now. We have to have something from the future outside us *and* inside us! We’re already wearing our 1990s clothes. Now we need to chew the 1990s candy. And it will take us back to our time.”

The machine was shaking now, rocking back and forth.

“I hope you’re right,” Ashley said. She stared at the candy in her hand.

“Just eat it!” I shouted at her over the mounting roar of the time machine.

I was already chewing my piece.

The sticky sweetness filled my mouth and slid down my throat like syrup.

Would it work? Was my idea right?

Would the candy and the clothes carry us forward in time?

I stared at the capsule walls. They began vibrating with a high-pitched hum. The walls started to fade, and a strange yellow light spread over us.

“Ashley, look! I’m starting to fade!” I cried.

Ashley’s body remained solid. Why wasn’t she fading along with me?

As the time machine walls faded away, a furious Captain Time came into view.

“How dare you reverse the controls!” he screamed.

His voice exploded inside my head.

He reached forward and grabbed Ashley’s arm. “You’re staying here with me, Princess!”

Inch by inch Captain Time pulled her out of the capsule—back into his time!

I was fading, fading away. Why wasn’t Ashley fading with me?

And then I realized what the problem was.

The candy. The Karamel Kreemie. She still hadn’t eaten the Karamel Kreemie.

“Chew the Kreemie!” I screamed at her. “Chew it or you’ll be left behind!”

“It’s too late!” Ashley wailed. “Too late!” She uttered a sob. And then in a trembling voice she called, “Bye, James.”

“The candy!” I cried, feeling far away from her.

I saw her stuff it into her mouth. I saw her bite down hard on it.

And as she bit down, the Captain began to grow smaller and smaller. We were leaving him behind.

“Chew it!” I shouted. “Keep chewing!”

We were rushing forward now, through people and cities, through time itself. Every cell in my body was tingling, as blurred faces and buildings and strange places flashed past me.

My skin was on fire.

“Keep chewing!” I shouted to Ashley. “It’s got to work! It’s got to.”

My stomach was in my throat. Bright lights and colors exploded around me. I was falling through the air. Faster and faster, the wind whizzing past me at a dizzying rate.

Suddenly I felt smooth cold metal beneath my hands. I opened my eyes and looked down.

I was holding on to a metal bar.

A metal safety bar.

I was on The Beast!

Ashley and I were roaring down that last hill. Behind me, I heard the screams of the other riders. The bright lights of the amusement park sparkled and winked and twirled around me.

The sky was purple. The orange moon was shining overhead.

Not quite full.

We had done it. We had returned to our own space and time. My jaws ached

from all that chewing.

“We did it, James!” Ashley cried happily.

The Beast slowed down and clattered into the platform.

I climbed out and nearly dropped to my knees to kiss that cold, beautiful concrete I thought I’d never see again.

But what time was it? What day? We’d been gone for days.

“Look, James!” Ashley pointed up.

The sky exploded in a shower of fireworks, sparkling bursts of orange and blue and pink and purple.

“It’s still Wednesday, James! The same day we left!”

“How can you tell?” I asked as a great white rocket spiraled high into the air and exploded in a cascade of sparkles.

“Don’t you remember? The fireworks!” she cried joyfully. “That’s why we came to the park today. Because we wanted to see the fireworks.”

I nodded, still in shock. Then I remembered.

There was going to be a fireworks display tonight, half an hour before closing time.

“You know what that means, James?” my cousin asked, her blue eyes flashing.

“No. What?” I asked.

“It means we have time to ride The Beast again!”

She grabbed my arm and dragged me back onto the platform. “Let’s go. One more time!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“Where do you get your ideas?”

That’s the question that R. L. Stine is asked most often. “I don’t know where my ideas come from,” he says. “But I do know that I have a lot more scary stories in my mind that I can’t wait to write.”

So far, he has written nearly three dozen mysteries and thrillers for young people, all of them best-sellers.

Bob grew up in Columbus, Ohio. Today he lives in an apartment near Central Park in New York City with his wife, Jane, and son, Matt.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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